

# minimalism

live a meaningful life



Joshua Fields Millburn & Ryan Nicodemus

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*For Chloe and Eric*

*The people who are rebelling meaningfully  
don't buy a lot of stuff.*

—David Foster Wallace

**minimalism: live a meaningful life**

Are you truly happy?

# FOREWORD

## A Brief Introduction

Conformity is the drug with which many people self-medicate. Not happy? Buy this. Buy that. Buy something. Keep up with the Joneses, the Trumps, the Kardashians. After all, you can be just like them, right?

Clearly this is blatantly wrong, we all know this, and yet we continue to try. Day in, day out, we try. We try to keep up, try to measure up, try to live up to societal expectations, placing immense pressure on ourselves to be something—or someone—we are not.

Consequently, people are more stressed than ever. We have more pressure put on us than any other time in history. You see it on your TV, the toothpick models and rugged “sexiest men alive” occupying the screen. *This* is what you’re *supposed* to look like. You hear it on your radio, the solipsistic over-indulgence of Hummer-driving rap stars and champagne-guzzling pop stars promulgating irresponsible living. *This* is how you’re *supposed* to consume. You notice it at work, the co-worker gossip about him and her and, god forbid, *you*. *This* is how you’re *supposed* to behave. To have the tallest building in town, you must tear down everyone else’s.

Suffice it to say, the pressure is all around us. Or is it?

The truth is that nearly all the pressure we feel is completely internal. Sure, this pressure is influenced by external factors, but the that doesn’t mean we have to take the bait. We needn’t succumb to these influences. Because even if you could be a Kardashian or a Trump or a Jones, it wouldn’t make you happy. Happiness comes from within, from inside yourself, from living a meaningful life. And that is what this book aims to help you discover.

## About The Minimalists

This book is ultimately about *you* and how *you* can live a meaningful life. But let’s talk about us for a moment.

We are Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus—*The Minimalists*. We’re a pair of thirty-year-old guys who write essays about living a meaningful life



with less stuff at TheMinimalists.com, a website with over 100,000 monthly readers. We've been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, CBC, NBC, FOX, and various other media outlets. Our essays have been featured on dozens of popular websites throughout the Internet, including *Zen Habits*, *Time Magazine's* #1 blog in the world. Both of us have extensive experience leading large groups of people in corporate America, coaching and developing hundreds of employees to grow as individuals and live more meaningful lives.

Once upon a time, we were two happy young professionals living in Dayton, Ohio. But we weren't *truly* happy. We were best friends in our late twenties, and we both had great six-figure jobs, nice cars, big houses, plenty of toys, and an abundance of stuff. And yet with all this stuff, we knew we were not satisfied with our lives. We knew we were not happy or fulfilled. We discovered that working 70–80 hours a week and buying more stuff didn't fill the void. So we took back control of our lives using the principles of minimalism to focus on what's important. The first chapter in this book, *How We Got Here*, goes into great detail about our journey into minimalism.

## About this Book

This book has been a long time in the making. Its initial iteration was conceived in November 2010 and completed in March 2011, resulting in a 300-page *how-to* guide for minimalism called *Minimalism In 21 Days*.

A 300-page book about how to become a minimalist? This didn't feel right to us. How could a book about minimalism—a book about how to reduce the stuff in your life so you can focus on what's important—be 300 pages? We could almost taste the irony. Don't get us wrong, it was a *good* book, far better than most things you can find on the internet. But because we didn't feel like it was a *great* book, and because it lacked a certain necessary brevity, we did what any responsible authors would have done: we scrapped the entire project and started over with a blank page. This was difficult to do, but it felt like the only genuine way to go about creating something more meaningful.

The resulting content is the book you are about to read. An attenuated version of the subject matter from *Minimalism In 21 Days* is available for free on our website (all 21 days of our journey are outlined there in detail). Likely the most interesting part of our initial journey into minimalism is the *Packing Party* in which we pretended Ryan was moving, packed up all his belongs—everything down to his toothbrush, underwear, and furniture—and he unpacked only the things he needed for the next three weeks. Afterwards, Ryan found that 80% of

his material possessions were still boxed and unused, all of which possessions he then sold, donated, or trashed at the end of this experiment. Each day from that 21-day journey—including Ryan’s *Packing Party*—can be found on our website.

We believe that our website gives you the ultimate *how-to-start* guide for free, as well as frequent updates by way of our essays on that site, which essays explore minimalism at a deep level and demonstrate practical ways to apply it to your life.

Similarly, we wrote this book to be used in a practical way; we certainly don’t want to waste your time. The tools we provide herein are designed to be used practically; they are designed to help you discover a more meaningful life. Furthermore, while this entire book can be consumed within a day or two, it is organized into seven succinct chunks, which are better digested in a week, one chapter at a time.

This book is different from the content on our website. While our website documents our journey into minimalism and our continued growth through experimentation, this book discusses minimalism in a different way: it discusses in great depth the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. It also gives you a lot more insight into our personal lives, into the painful events that led us to our journey into minimalism, and into our world outside the web.

The book itself is written and organized in a particular way. It is written to make you think about your life and how you live it, to make you do some work and introspection so you can step away from your old life and journey into a new life filled with meaning. It is set up to help you realize that you can change, you can re-select who you’re going to be, you can become the best person you’re capable of becoming—the real you, the passionate, loving, compassionate, happy you. So if you truly want to maximize what you learn from this book, we ask you to not only read its content, but also do three things as you read:

1. **Read the content more than once.** The first reading primes the pump, but the repetition of re-reading the parts you find most meaningful will fuel your desire to take action and change your life.
2. **Take notes.** Unlike the essays on our website, this book is not designed to be read just once. It is not a theoretical document. We want you to get the most out of this book, which means taking notes, highlighting certain passages, and making lists to help you better understand yourself.

3. **Take action.** This is the most important step. If you read this book but do nothing with what you've learned, then you are wasting your time. It's fine to take in the information to start, but *action* is what's going to change your life. We don't overwhelm you with action in these chapters, but we do ask you to make many small adjustments in your life that add up to significant change over time.

For all intents and purposes, this is a book of advice. The thoughts, experiments, strategies, and recommendations herein are our advice to you. Whatever stage of life you're in right now, this book can help improve the most important things in your life: your health, your relationships, the pursuit of your passions, your growth as an individual, and your contribution to other people. These five dimensions are the fundamentals of living meaningfully. We go into great detail to explain why these five areas are so important and how you can improve each area in your life.

Finally, it is important to note that while we are sharing our sixty combined years of living through these pages, we do not have all the answers. The strategies, experiments, and stories we share in this book are things we've learned from innumerable sources, from Leo Babauta to Tony Robbins and everyone in-between. The common thread, however, is that these are the strategies that worked incredibly well for us and thousands of other people. Although we are all different, we are all looking for the same thing: how to live with more meaning in our lives.

# CHAPTER 1: OUR ARRIVAL

## Who Are You?

The material possessions you accumulate are not going to make you happy. We all know this, and yet many people search for life's meaning through accumulating more possessions. Real happiness, however, comes from who you are—from who you've become. Real happiness comes from within. Likewise, discontentment is also a result of who you've become. Consequently, if you are living intentionally and meaningfully, you will feel happy, fulfilled, and content a vast majority of the time.

If you want to base your life on that of the average person's life, then this book is not for you—because the average person is not happy. And just because most people are unhappy doesn't mean you have to be. You don't have to settle for a mediocre life just because the people around you have settled.

## Finding Discontent

In 2009, life looked great for both of us. We both worked for the same telecommunications corporation (Joshua since 1999, Ryan since 2004); we both enjoyed all the perks of a lifestyle most people envied; we both lived our version of the American Dream. But for some reason neither one of us could explain at the time, we were not happy, we didn't feel fulfilled, and we certainly didn't feel content.

The topic of happiness began peeking its beautiful little head into our conversations more frequently as time passed. With each promotion at work, with each award or fancy trip we won, with every nugget of praise we received, the happiness accompanying those things quickly came and went. The faster it came, the faster it was gone. So we sought happiness by attempting to get more of these nuggets of praise, trying to improve our feelings of self-worth and significance by “achieving” more. We worked harder and harder to obtain these nuggets, often working twice as many hours as the average American to prove our value.

It was something like a cocaine high. The more praise we got, the more we

needed it just to function, the more we needed it to feel happy. It got to the point where we were living just to break even emotionally.

Discontent flooded our lives. We knew something needed to change, but we weren't sure what. So we did what most Americans do: we tried to purchase happiness. Even though we were both earning over six figures in "well respected" positions, we spent more money than we made, purchasing things like luxury cars, large houses, big-screen TVs, fancy furniture, expensive vacations, and everything else our heavily-mediated consumer-culture told us would make us happy.

But it didn't make us happy. In fact, it brought us even more unhappiness and discontent, because not only did the old feelings stick around, but we added to those feelings by going into debt. And when the temporary high from each of our purchases dissipated, we were left feeling depressed, empty, alone, and helpless.

And then, in late 2009, a series of dreadful events made Joshua begin to question every aspect of his life, including his material possessions, his career, his success, and the meaning of life.

## **A Slow Burn**

But let's rewind our story a bit, because our discontent didn't suddenly descend from the heavens, striking us like a bolt of lightning. We didn't wake up one morning and say, *Gee, everything was fine yesterday, but today I'm unhappy*. Discontentment doesn't work that way. Rather, it's a slow burn; it's a pernicious problem that creeps into your life after years of subtle dissatisfaction.

## **It Started When We Were Young**

The first signs of discontent appeared in our lives well before our days in corporate America. It started when we were children.

The two of us met twenty years ago in the fifth grade in Lebanon, Ohio (a small town between Cincinnati and Dayton). We were ten years old, and even by then our lives were filled with discontent. We both grew up in dysfunctional households during the 1980s (before *dysfunctional* was a popular term). Both sets of our parents were divorced. Joshua's parents separated when he was three; his mother fell victim to alcoholism, forcing him to raise himself most years after age six; his bi-polar, schizophrenic father died when he was nine. Ryan's mother had similar substance abuse issues, which later led to substance abuse for Ryan as a teenager. Both of us were raised in less than ideal conditions for much

of our childhoods, which in retrospect, was a recipe for disaster.

By age 12, we were both overweight, uncool, and utterly unhappy with our lives. We did things to try to escape. Back then, the easiest escape was food. We experienced instant gratification by stuffing our faces; we felt certain we would be happy, at least for a moment. It was one of the few aspects of our lives we could control, because everything else felt so out of control. We lived in dilapidated, cockroach-infested apartments with single mothers who cared about us, but who were more concerned with getting drunk or high than providing for their children.

As we approached high school, Ryan moved in with his father, into a much more stable household. His father owned a small painting-and-wallpapering company and was able to provide a better lower-middle-class lifestyle. Ryan's father was the antithesis of his mother: he held a stable job, he showed he cared in myriad ways, and he was a devout Jehovah's Witness, among other radical differences. The long list of positive changes were too much for Ryan to handle all at once, so while he did his best to conform to the strict household rules, he also rebelled, experimenting with alcohol, marijuana, and harder drugs.

Joshua took a different route. While he didn't experiment with alcohol or drugs—most likely because he was so turned off by his mother's rampant alcoholism—he found another way to cope: namely, obsession and compulsion in the form of OCD. He discovered that even though he couldn't control his living situation—the crappy apartment, the drunken mother, the lack of money—he could control himself. So he lost a lot of weight during his freshman year in high school, in an unhealthy way (by eating very little), and he spent hours organizing his meager possessions, obsessing over the smallest things, looking for some kind of order in a world of chaos.

During our last year of high school, we had a memorable conversation that we still talk about today as being the tipping point that led us into the chaos and confusion of our consumer-driven culture. Because we grew up relatively poor, we thought that the key to our happiness would be money. Specifically: *If we could just make \$50,000 per year, then we'd be set.* Our parents hadn't earned that kind of money, and they weren't happy, so we figured if we could pass some kind of arbitrary threshold (\$50,000 per annum, in this case), then we would somehow be happy. It sounds ridiculous now, but it made perfect sense to a couple of eighteen-year-olds who were about to enter the world on their own.

We graduated high school in 1999 and went in our own directions for a few years. Neither of us went to college straightaway. Instead, we both entered the

working world.

Ryan worked for his father, hanging wallpaper and painting walls in opulent houses throughout southwest Ohio. Joshua found a sales job with a large corporation. Both careers were steeped in certain monetary expectations. Neither of us particularly enjoyed what we were doing, but we didn't know any better—we didn't realize you could actually do work you enjoyed. For us, our jobs were designed to do two things for our lifestyle: allow us to make money and give us a certain kind of social status.

Ryan was making enough money to live. It wasn't great money, but it paid the bills. He also earned an identity from his job. The fleet of half-a-dozen *Nicodemus* paint trucks that patrolled the streets of Warren County, Ohio, spoke volumes for his future. Plus, there was comfort in knowing that one day he would take over his father's business, making it his own, and maybe even passing it on to his future children.

But Ryan also knew the painting business wouldn't make him rich. He was painting multi-million-dollar homes, which he knew he'd never be able to afford, even when he took over his dad's business, which, if he worked really hard, he'd be able to do once his dad retired in a decade or two. There was a fair amount of discontent that showed up for Ryan, realizing that he would never be able to get something he wanted. Although, at the time, he didn't know why he wanted a palatial home or why it would make him happy, he was merely unhappy with the fact that he would never be able to afford such a luxurious house. So Ryan searched for contentment in other ways.

Joshua found a job in which he had the potential to earn more money than the people with whom he went to high school, a job that had long-term career-growth possibilities. All he had to do was work like an Iditarod sled dog to "get results." So work like a dog he did, often working more than a month straight—seven days a week—without a day off. The more he worked, the more he sold. And the more he sold, the more money he earned and the more he was showered with praise. At 18, he was already making more money than his mother ever had. He was poised for (corporate) greatness. At least ostensibly.

But Joshua experienced discontent too. Although he was making over \$50,000 by age 20, he had little personal time. The corporate world of "performing" and "achiving" was taking its toll, so he tried to purchase happiness. He tried to manufacture a life of contentment.

## **Manufactured Contentment**

Unhappy with our jobs and our personal lives, we tried to fix our discontent in different ways.

Ryan turned to a couple extremes. First, he turned back to his father's religion—the religion of his childhood—swearing off drugs and worldly activities, becoming a devout Jehovah's Witness, embracing its tenets, and searching for life's meaning through religion. Ryan married his high school girlfriend at 18, a few months after graduating high school. He and his wife adopted the JW religious tenets, bought a small house in the small hometown in which they were raised, and started talking about creating a family together.

But it turned out to be a marriage saturated with fear and distrust. After three years of tedious matrimony, the marriage ended nastily, upon which Ryan turned back to drugs and alcohol, looking for an escape from his painful failed reality.

Joshua, on the other hand, continued his laser-focused work in corporate America. He worked his tail off, consistently performing as one of the best sales people in the entire company. He earned his first promotion to a leadership/managerial position at 22, making him the youngest person in the company's 130-year history to have earned the position.

With this promotion came more money, more responsibility, and somehow even more work. Joshua's life was consumed by work. At age 23, he got married, bought a house in suburbia, and continued to work more and more as his personal life seemed to occur somewhere in the unfocused background—somewhere to the right of the frame. He hardly realized he had gotten married. He neglected and took for granted the relationship with his wonderful wife. He hardly noticed the purchase of a large house with more bedrooms than inhabitants. He hardly noticed the discontent that was brewing within him. He simply knew he wasn't happy, but life went on at its breakneck pace.

To deal with his more subtle discontent, Joshua tried to buy his happiness. He spent money on *stuff*, buying fancy clothes, expensive vacations, consumer electronics, gadgets, and multitudes of unnecessary junk. When those things didn't bring lasting happiness, he turned to his childhood vice of food. By his early twenties, he weighed more than he had ever weighed; he was 70 pounds overweight and severely out of shape. *But at least I'm making money!* he thought, giving himself an identity in his job, giving himself a certain kind of status and satisfaction in knowing that he performed well at his job, albeit a job he didn't love and wasn't passionate about.

## **Reconnecting the Duo**



It was around this time that we reconnected, almost accidentally, at the nadir of our early twenties.

Ryan decided that taking over his father's business was not for him. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but he thought he'd give the corporate world a shot. Because if he could just make over \$50,000 per year, then life would be good and he would be happy, right?

So, in 2004, shortly after Joshua got married and Ryan got divorced, Joshua hired Ryan to work at the corporation in which he had slaved for the last half-decade. Like Joshua, Ryan quickly excelled, working incredibly hard and becoming one of the company's top performing salespeople.

We both earned several more promotions over the years, during our mid- and late-twenties—promotions with fancy titles like *Channel Manager*, *Regional Manager*, and *Director*. And with those titles came more money and more responsibility and more work. Sadly, some far darker things came with those promotions as well: anxiety and stress and worry and overwhelm and depression.

And yet, try as we did, our search for happiness through status and material possessions never yielded real lasting happiness or contentment. By our late twenties we were earning great money at jobs we hated, but we were in debt—financially and emotionally.

## **Back to the Future**

Fast forward back to 2009, back to our 80-hour workweeks, back to our ostensibly perfect lives that were crumbling on the inside.

On October 8, 2009, Joshua's mother died of stage-four lung cancer. She battled it over a year, enduring repeat chemo and radiation treatments. But the cancer spread to her brain and other organs, and she was no match for the disease in the end.

Oddly enough, the cancer seemed to be a metaphor for Joshua's life as well. While things looked good on the surface—the marriage, the fancy job, the cars, the material possessions—there was something seriously wrong on the inside.

Truth be told, neither of us were happy. When we told ourselves a decade earlier that we'd be happy if we could just make \$50,000 per year, we were wrong. At first, in our early twenties, we thought maybe we had simply miscalculated the exact amount required to be happy, so we changed our estimation: If we could make \$60,000 per year, then we could be happy, right? And when that didn't work: If we could make \$75,000 and then \$90,000 and then \$100,000 per year, then we could be happy, right? It was a never-ending

cycle. Each year we made more money, and yet each year we spent more than we earned in an effort to subdue our perpetual discontent created by the lifestyles we were living. The equation itself was broken.

After Joshua's mother died, we had another conversation about happiness. We discussed why we weren't happy and what it would take to make us happy. Obviously the old formula of "If we could make \$X, then we could be happy" was not panning out. We were both making over six figures; we were both successful twenty-eight-year-old young executives; we both "had it figured out" according to certain cultural standards. But we knew the truth: we didn't have it figured out at all.

Was this what we had been waiting for all our lives? Were we going to continue to work ridiculously long hours at a corporation that didn't care about us? Were we going to work our way into upper-level management—becoming COOs or CEOs with seven- or eight-figure salaries—just to be even more depressed by the time we were in our early forties? It didn't sound appealing to us—our dreams of climbing the corporate ladder seemed more like nightmares the more we talked about it.

The death of Joshua's mother put everything into perspective: We only have a finite amount of time on this earth. It can be spent accumulating monetary wealth, or it can be spent in a meaningful way—the latter of which doesn't necessarily preclude someone from the former, but the relentless pursuit of riches doesn't lead to a meaningful life.

So we decided to take an inventory of our lives. We wanted to find out what was making us unhappy, and what we needed to do to change those things in our lives, so we could experience happiness, passion, and freedom.

## **Anchors**

First, we identified our *anchors*. In other words, we had discovered that "getting what we wanted" (large houses, bigger paychecks, material possessions, and corporate awards) wasn't making us happy, so we wanted to identify what was anchoring us—what was making us feel stuck and preventing us from growing.

The concept of anchors really struck a chord with both of us. It forced us to take an honest look in the mirror and identify everything we thought might be holding us back from living happy, fulfilled lives.

The exercise we performed was simple: over the course of one week, each of us wrote down anything we thought *might be* an anchor. After all, the first step to solving a problem is to identify the problem, right? As the week progressed,

our lists of anchors grew, and by the end of the week Joshua had written down 83 anchors and Ryan, 54. Plenty of anchors.

Our next step was to identify our priorities. We started prioritizing by breaking our anchors into two categories: major anchors and minor anchors. Major anchors were the most obvious examples of things that were keeping us from feeling free and content, including things like our houses (viz. the large mortgage payments that went with them), certain relationships with people (viz. unhealthy, pernicious relationships that didn't add value to our lives), car payments and other large bills, major debts, our careers, and anything else that took an appreciable amount of our time without returning value to our lives. Minor anchors made up the bulk of our lists and included items like cable bills, Internet bills, other bills, smaller debts, unused clothes, unused household items, nighttime college classes, household clutter, certain unproductive or unhealthy periphery relationships, daily drive time (time wasted in the car each day), and other small things that took small amounts of our time, attention, and focus.

We decided that getting rid of many of these anchors over a period of time would allow us to reclaim much of our own time, time which could be spent in more meaningful ways. Because the major anchors appeared to be the hardest to tackle, we started with those in an effort to deal with the hardest things first. For example, every extra penny Joshua earned was spent on making extra payments toward his debts. No more trips, vacations, or fancy dinners; all his money went towards paying off his car and his vast credit card debt, which, despite a healthy income, had climbed to an incredibly unhealthy level. Eventually, over a two year period, Joshua paid off his car and paid down his debts. Other major anchors were handled in a similar fashion. We eventually jettisoned many of our possessions, eliminating the excess in favor of things we liked and enjoyed—things we actually used in our daily lives. Over the course of two years, our anchors of old were no longer weighing us down.

## **Making Hard Decisions**

Because some of the major anchors involved our relationships with other people, some tough decisions had to be made. Soon after Joshua's mother died in late 2009, Joshua decided that his marriage of nearly six years wasn't working. He knew that neither he nor his wife were happy, that neither of their values or long-term desires were aligned, and that they both wanted vastly different things in life. They loved each other and wanted to find a way to make their marriage work, so they sat down and talked about their differences and worked on a plan

to save their marriage. They both attended marriage counseling and took steps to come into better alignment, working together for months in an effort to repair a broken marriage. Their differences, however, were too great, and Joshua and his wife decided to part ways. It was the hardest decision he ever had to make. Thankfully, they were able to remain close friends who still care about each other deeply.

Furthermore, Joshua was faced with the dilemma of what to do with his mother's stuff after her death—those sentimental items we tend to hold on to in perpetuity. It was an incredibly difficult time in his life, it goes without saying. His mother had lived a thousand miles away, and after she passed it was his responsibility to vacate her apartment in Florida. It was a small, one-bedroom place, but it was packed wall-to-wall with her belongings. His mother had great taste—she could have been an interior designer—and none of her stuff was *junk* in the *Hoarders* sense of the word. Nevertheless, there was a lot of stuff in her home, likely three or four apartments worth of stuff in her tiny one-bedroom apartment.

His mom was always shopping, always accumulating more stuff. She had antique furniture throughout her apartment, a stunning oak canopy-bed that consumed almost her entire bedroom, two closets jam packed with clothes, picture frames standing on every flat surface, original artwork hanging on the walls, and tasteful creative decorations in every nook and cranny and crevasse. There was 64 years of accumulation in her apartment.

So Joshua did what any son would do: He rented a large U-Haul truck. Then he called a storage facility back in Ohio to make sure they had a big enough storage unit. The cost of the truck was \$1600. The storage facility was \$120 per month for the size he needed. Financially, the cost was expensive, but he quickly found out that the emotional cost was much higher.

At first, Joshua didn't want to let go of anything. If you've ever lost a parent or a loved one or have been through a similarly emotional time, then you understand exactly how hard it was for him to let go of any of those possessions. So instead of letting go, he was going to cram every trinket and figurine and piece of oversized furniture into that Lilliputian storage locker in Ohio. Floor to ceiling. That way he knew that Mom's stuff was there if he ever wanted it, if he ever needed access to it for some incomprehensible reason. He even planned to put a few pieces of her furniture in his home as subtle reminders of her.

The week after her death, he started boxing up her belongings. Every picture frame and every little porcelain doll and every white doily on every shelf. He

packed every bit of her that remained.

Or so he thought.

And then he looked under her bed.

Among the organized chaos that comprised the crawlspace beneath her bed, there were four boxes, each labeled with a number. Each numbered box was sealed with packing tape. Joshua cut through the tape and found old papers from his elementary school days from nearly a quarter century earlier. Spelling tests, cursive writing lessons, artwork, it was all there, every shred of paper from his first four years of school. It was evident that she hadn't accessed the sealed boxes in years, and yet she had held on to these things because she was trying to hold on to pieces of her son, pieces of the past, much like Joshua was attempting to hold on to pieces of her and her past now.

That's when he realized his retention efforts were futile. He could hold on to her memories without her stuff, just as she had always remembered him and his childhood and all their memories without ever accessing those sealed boxes under her bed. She didn't need papers from twenty-five years ago to remember her son, just as her son didn't need a storage locker filled with her stuff to remember her.

Joshua called U-Haul and canceled the truck. And then, over the next twelve days, he donated all her stuff—100% of it—to places and people who could actually use it. Of course it was difficult to let go, but Joshua realized quite a few things about the relationship between our memories and our possessions during the entire experience:

- We are not our stuff.
- We are more than our possessions.
- Our memories are not under our beds.
- Our memories are within us, not our things.
- An item that is merely sentimental for us can be useful for someone else.
- Holding on to *things* weighs on us mentally and emotionally.
- You can take pictures of items you want to remember.
- Old photographs can be scanned.
- Letting go is incredibly freeing.

It is important to note that we don't think that sentimental items are bad or evil or that holding on to them is wrong. We don't. Rather, we think the pernicious nature of sentimental items—and overt sentimentality in general—is far more subtle. If you want to get rid of an item but the only reason you are holding on to it is for sentimental reasons—if it is weighing on you, if it's an anchor—then perhaps it's time to get rid of it, perhaps it is time to free yourself of the weight. That doesn't mean you need to get rid of everything though.

One by one, over time, the two of us tackled many of our anchors—big and small. In the process of tackling our anchors, we searched for ways to do so more efficiently. We searched for examples of people who had overcome their fears, who had freed themselves of their anchors and started living more meaningful lives. This is how we inadvertently stumbled upon the concepts of minimalism.

## **Discovering Minimalism**

In late 2009, shortly after Joshua's mother had died, while his marriage was in shambles, and we were both unhappy with our current nose-to-the-grindstone situations, Joshua came across a website called *Exile Lifestyle*, developed by a guy named Colin Wright.

We were intrigued by Colin's website. Here was this young, 24-year-old entrepreneur who was living an amazing lifestyle—a seemingly impossible lifestyle. He had left his high-paying job to pursue his passions, which happened to be traveling the world and running his businesses from anywhere. His website—what he called a *blog*, a term we were unfamiliar with at the time—documented his travels and allowed his thousands of readers to participate in his journey: Colin's readers got to vote on where he would travel next.

We were amazed that this guy “left everything” to travel to a new country every four months; not that we wanted to travel that extensively ourselves (we didn't), but we did want to have the freedom to pursue our own passions, which we had discovered weren't inside the corporate juggernaut.

Colin also used a new term with which we were utterly unfamiliar: he said he was a *minimalist*. On his website he wrote about how this movement called *minimalism* allowed him to focus on the important stuff in his life while shedding the excess crap that got in the way. This was fascinating—it was like someone turned on the lightbulb for us for the first time and presented us with a tool to help us weed through the clutter in our lives to finally to get to what was important. Because he traveled, he only owned 72 things at the time—there were

pictures of all his possessions on his website, all of which possessions could fit into a bag he carried with him while he traveled. The most striking part about this was Colin's contentment. He exuded happiness and excitement and passion. He loved his life and this was completely apparent.

It's important to note that although we deeply respect Colin, we didn't want to live like him, we didn't want to travel the world or live with less than 100 things; but we did want the freedom that his minimalist lifestyle afforded him, and we wanted the happiness and passion that accompanied that freedom. And so during the first half of 2010, we slowly removed our anchors, one by one, as we followed Colin's journey.

But maybe we were too old and too rooted to become minimalists. Maybe this minimalism thing was only for young guys without many possessions who wanted to travel extensively.

We discovered that wasn't true either.

Through Colin, we discovered two other minimalists who were in many ways a lot like us: Leo Babauta and Joshua Becker.

Leo Babauta, creator of *Zen Habits*, *Time* Magazine's #1 blog in the world, had a story that resonated with us immediately. He was a once-divorced guy in his mid-thirties who overcame all kinds of adversity to live a more meaningful life. Using minimalism to simplify his life, he had been able to accomplish some amazing things in less than three years: he had quit smoking, lost 70 pounds, got into the best shape of his life, got out of debt, moved from his native Guam to San Francisco, and quit his corporate job but was still able to provide for his wife and six children.

Similarly, thirty-something Joshua Becker, a husband and father of two children living in Vermont, was able to simplify his suburban-family life using minimalism while maintaining his job at a local church and helping other people learn more about minimalism through his website *Becoming Minimalist*.

Leo Babauta and Joshua Becker proved to us that minimalism wasn't only for single white guys who didn't want to work a 9-to-5. It was for anyone who was interested in living a simpler, more intentional life. It was for anyone who wanted to focus on the important aspects in life, rather than the material possessions that are so heavily linked to success and happiness by our culture.

In fact, on our website we have a page dedicated to defining minimalism in a parodic, tongue-in-cheek way, poking fun at the cynics and skeptics who treat minimalism as a trend or fad. We start our definition with a joke:

*To be a minimalist you must live with less than 100 things, and you can't own a car or a home or a TV, and you can't have a career, and you have to be able to live in exotic places all over the world, and you have to write a blog, and you can't have any children, and you have to be a young white male from a privileged background.*

Okay, we're joking. Obviously. But people who often dismiss minimalism as some sort of fad or trend usually mention some of the above "restrictions" as to why they could "never be a minimalist."

The truth is that minimalism isn't about any of those things, but it can help you accomplish all that stuff (well, to be fair, it can't help you become a young white male if you aren't one. But who cares about that anyway?) If you desire to live with less than 100 things or not own a car or travel all over the world without fear, minimalism can help. But that's not the point.

The point is that minimalism is a tool to help you achieve freedom. Freedom from fear, freedom from worry, freedom from overwhelm, freedom from guilt, freedom from depression, freedom from enslavement. Freedom. Real freedom.

A minimalist can, however, own a car or own a house or have children or have a career. Minimalism looks different for everyone because it is about finding what is essential to *you*. There are tons of successful minimalists who do some or all these things. So how can they all be so different and yet still be minimalists? That brings us back to our original question: What is minimalism?

Minimalism is a tool we use to live a meaningful life. It is a tool to achieve happiness, which is (let's face it) what we are all looking for. We all want to be happy. Minimalism can help. There are no rules in minimalism. Rather, minimalism is simply about stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what's important.

Minimalism has helped us in several ways, including:

- Reclaiming our time
- Ridding ourselves of excess stuff
- Enjoying our lives
- Discovering meaning in our lives
- Living in the moment
- Focusing on what's important
- Pursuing our passions



- Finding happiness
- Doing anything we want to do
- Finding our missions
- Experiencing freedom
- Creating more, consuming less

How has minimalism helped us with these things? Minimalism is a lifestyle choice. Minimalists choose to get rid of the unnecessary in favor of what's important. But the level of specificity is up to you. Minimalists search for happiness not through things, but through life itself. Thus, it's up to you to determine what is necessary and what is superfluous to your life. Throughout this book we intend to give you some ideas of how to determine these things and how to achieve a minimalist lifestyle without having to succumb to some sort of strict code or set of rules.

A word of warning: It isn't easy to take the first few steps, but the journey gets much easier and more rewarding the further you go. But the first steps into minimalism often take some radical changes in mindset, actions, and habits.

So, if we had to sum it up in one sentence, we would say, *Minimalism is a tool to eliminate life's excess, focus on the essentials, and find happiness, fulfillment, and freedom.*

## **Embracing Minimalism**

It was as our lives were spiraling downward in ever-diminishing circles towards empty oblivion that we embraced minimalism. Or perhaps it embraced us, as it were. It was a beacon in the night. We lingered curiously on the limbic portions of minimalism's perimeter, scouring feverishly through Internet page after Internet page looking for more information and guidance and enlightenment, watching and learning and trying to understand what this whole minimalism thing was all about. Through months of research (while we removed our anchors) we traveled farther and farther down the rabbit hole, and over time we had discovered a group of people without a lot of things but with myriad happiness and passion and freedom, things for which we desperately yearned.

Eventually we embraced these concepts—the concepts of minimalism and simplicity—as a way of life and discovered that we too could be happy, but it wasn't through owning more stuff, it wasn't through accumulation. We took

back control of our lives so we could focus on what's important, so we could focus on life's deeper meaning.

Happiness, as far as we are concerned, is achieved internally through living a meaningful life, a life that is filled with passion and freedom, a life in which we can grow as individuals and contribute to other people in meaningful ways. These are the bedrocks of happiness. Not stuff.

## **Creating "The Minimalists"**

In the summer of 2010 we had no intentions of writing nonfiction online or starting a website about minimalism. But then, almost accidentally, Joshua met Colin Wright in person while on a trip to New York City in June. Meeting Colin solidified his online personas—his personality shone through in person, displaying layers of happiness and contentment that didn't seem possible to a discontented man approaching 30, living on the corporate continuum.

They met in Manhattan after connecting on Twitter. Joshua had been writing literary fiction throughout his twenties, whenever he had a free moment outside of work. He knew Colin was making money online publishing his own material and he wanted to pick Colin's brain about self-publishing. They met for lunch and Colin was incredibly helpful. He encouraged Joshua to explore the non-traditional route of publishing his fiction, citing several resources that would later become helpful. They stayed in contact after that initial meeting and eventually worked on several projects together, including Colin's memoir *My Exile Lifestyle* and Joshua's short story collection *Falling While Sitting Down*.

During that meeting, Colin said one thing that stuck with Joshua—the one thing that led him to team up with Ryan to create *The Minimalists*:

*You should do something online. You could make an impact. The world needs people like you to help them see things more clearly.*

Joshua wrote these words in his journal. They stuck with him long after the meeting. And with those words we decided to create *The Minimalists*. We wanted to do two things with our website: We wanted to document our personal journeys into minimalism, and we wanted to help other people live more meaningful lives using minimalism as a foundation. We started building the site in November 2010, and quickly discovered we were absolutely clueless about how to create a website. We didn't know the first thing about HTML or *blogging* or writing nonfiction online (sure, Joshua had his literary fiction writing

experience, which helped with our writing, but we were clueless about the rest). So we did extensive research and built our site over a six-week timeframe, laboring vigorously until the last minute. We officially launched TheMinimalists.com on December 14, 2010.

And so there we were: these two suit-and-tie corporate guys, nearing 30 as our twenties twilighted, listening to and taking advice from some Gen-Y blogger. We had started a website, documented our journey into minimalism, and started writing a couple essays a week for the site. And then several months of unexpected excitement transpired, and our lives changed within nine months of creating our website.

We met some of the most amazing people on the Internet, eventually turning those online relationships into real-life friendships, the likes of whom included incredibly cool bloggers like the aforementioned Leo Babauta and Joshua Becker, as well as myriad others, such as Julien Smith, Chris Guillebeau, et al. With the help of many of these outstanding people, as well as our amazing readers who relentlessly shared our essays, our website grew exponentially—within nine months we had over 100,000 monthly readers and over 10,000 subscribed readers. By that time people were spending over 11,000 hours per month on our site. We had been featured and interviewed on popular websites all over the web. We received the most incredible emails about how we have changed peoples' lives with our essays. We published an essay collection called *Minimalism: Essential Essays*, which reached #1 on Amazon's Bestseller list. Joshua published his first fiction book, *Falling While Sitting Down: Stories*, which also reached #1, as did the first publication of the book you're reading right now. As a consequence, we both left our corporate jobs and began focusing full-time on living more meaningful lives.

## **What It Means to Live a Meaningful Life**

What does it mean to live a meaningful life? Generally, through our essays and books, we speak of minimalism as a tool that has allowed us to pursue more meaningful lives, so it's important we define what this means.

After much cerebration, deliberation, discussion, research, and experimentation, we discovered five dimensions that allow us to live a meaningful life:

1. Health
2. Relationships
3. Passions
4. Growth
5. Contribution

It took us months of removing the anchors from our lives and getting rid of the clutter that surrounded us to discover these five areas. We didn't stumble into them haphazardly. Instead, we discovered what was most important in our lives through trial and error.

Minimalism made this discovery possible. By age 28, everything in our lives seemed foggy. We had everything we were *supposed* to have, everything our culture advertised would make us happy, and yet we weren't. Worse, we had gotten to the point at which we didn't know what was important anymore. Getting rid of the clutter in our lives allowed us rediscover these five key areas. Thus, getting rid of our stuff was the initial bite at the apple, allowing us to make room to fill our lives with more meaningful pursuits.

Through months of rigorous documentation, the above five areas are the areas we changed in our lives that had the largest positive impact and resulted in more satisfaction and contentment for the two of us. The following five chapters discuss each of these concepts in depth, much more than can be discussed on our website. Throughout these chapters we consider why these areas are the most important areas of our lives, how minimalism has allowed us to focus on these dimensions, and we give you personal examples of how we changed our lives in all five areas.

The book's final chapter, *Confluence*, binds together these five dimensions and asks the reader some important questions about his or her life. These questions are not rhetorical; they are meant to make you think, take notes, and make lists based on those questions. Similarly, as we stated in this book's foreword, we encourage you to actively engage in all the following chapters by reading the content more than once, taking notes, highlighting meaningful passages, making lists, and, most importantly, taking action.

Ultimately, this book is meant to make you take little actions each day that will radically improve your life over time.

Let's begin, shall we?

## CHAPTER 2: HEALTH

### The Importance of Health

Health is the most important of the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. Don't believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, finding a perfect match in your significant other, paying off all your debt, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), and not needing to work another day in your life.

Now imagine you wake up tomorrow morning with a sharp pain in your gut. You leave your beach house, drive to the doctor in your luxury vehicle, and wait for her to tell you what's wrong. "You have less than a month to live," she tells you. "And you likely won't be able to do much more than get out of bed after today." Oh, the heartache. You finally got "everything you ever wanted," but your failing health immediately took it away, and your possessions couldn't do a thing for you. Without your health you're unable to enjoy even the simplest things in life.

### Defining Health

We are not health experts. This is not a book about diet and exercise. By the end of this chapter it might start to feel like a health and exercise book, but we assure you that is not our intent. Rather, we believe your health is the best place to start your journey towards a more meaningful life. We want you to enjoy your life, and living a healthy lifestyle gives you the optimum conditions to do so. Everything in this chapter is based on our personal experiences of weight loss, exercise, dietary changes, lifestyle changes, and miscellaneous things we've experienced that have helped us and others live more meaningful lives.

For the purposes of this book, we are referring to *physical health* when we use the general term *health*. We recognize that the word *health* extends beyond physical health as well. For example, concepts such as emotional health, mental health, spiritual health, and financial health are all broad concepts that are important aspects of enriching your life. These concepts are touched upon—directly or indirectly—within this book, because *emotional*, *mental*, *spiritual*,

and *financial health* can be a result of living meaningfully and intentionally, and we discuss many of these concepts in detail on our website (while generally avoiding them in this book for the sake of attenuation).

## **The Main Ingredients**

In its simplest terms, there are two main ingredients of living a healthy life: *eating* and *exercising*. In other words: what we *put into* our bodies and what we *do with* our bodies.

This might sound overly simplistic—at the surface it is simple—but fundamentally, the two things that most impact your physical health are what you eat and how you exercise. You already know this, at least intellectually, but this chapter is designed to help you feel it emotionally and provide you with some incredibly simple tools to help you improve your health.

## **Feeling Better**

The desire to improve your health has little to do with *looking better*. At least that's not what we're concerned with when we talk about *getting healthy* or *living a healthy life* (although, nearly 100% of the time, a person who starts living a healthier lifestyle starts looking better almost immediately, which is a fantastic bonus). Instead, we're far more concerned about how you *feel*. We want you to *feel better*; *looking better* is a nice perk that is essentially guaranteed once you start feeling better.

Thus, we're not concerned with your vanity muscles in these pages (even though a lot of this stuff will help them grow, if that's what you're interested in). Rather, we're concerned with how you feel. We know if you feel better, you'll be able to better enjoy every other facet of your life.

## **What You Put Into Your Body**

Please note that we use the term *diet* throughout the next few sections to describe a *dietary lifestyle* (i.e., a change in what you consume on a daily basis). We do not, however, use the word *diet* to describe a temporary prescribed set of planned meals that will get you to a specific weight-loss goal (e.g., lose 30 lbs. in 30 days). A change in dietary lifestyle is not only a change in what you consume but a change in how you think about what you consume. A temporary *diet* almost always fails after the post-*diet* behavior commences. A lifestyle change, by definition, can't fail unless you make a negative change thereafter.

It's also important to note that there is not a singular, ideal dietary model to

follow to live a healthier life. This frustrates some people because it is much easier to be told what to eat; it's much easier to follow a strict set of guidelines from which you are not allowed to deviate.

Our primary focus in the next few sections is on food (followed by several sections about exercise), but the above section title is deliberately broader than just food; *what you put into your body* encompasses more than your diet. That's because it's important to be cognizant of anything that goes into your body—anything you ingest like food or medicine, as well as anything that enters your body in any other way (e.g., through the skin). Remember, the desire here isn't to lose weight or look better; the desire is to live a healthier life and feel better.

## **Foods to Avoid**

With respect to the foods you eat, and irrespective of your dietary needs or requirements, there are certain foods you should completely eliminate from your diet if you want to feel better.

- **Processed and packaged foods.** We want our food to be as close to its original state as possible. The additives and preservatives in packaged foods add no nutritional value to your diet, and the chemicals in some of these foods can be harmful to your long-term health.
- **Sugar.** This includes all varieties of plain sugar (cane, raw, etc.), as well as anything you might refer to as *sweets* (cola, cake, candy, etc.).

## **Drastically Reduce or Eliminate**

This part is usually the hardest part for people to follow. That's because it's easier to fast than it is to diet. Consequently, it's easier to eliminate certain foods from your diet completely (*I'm not allowed to eat this!*) than it is to reduce the consumption of an item (*Oh, one more bowl of pasta won't kill me!*). That kind of mentality makes reduction a slippery slope, one that sometimes leads right back to regular consumption. We recognize that eliminating all the following items from your diet might not be ideal, but you can always eliminate them for just 10 days (you can do anything for 10 days, right?) and reintroduce small amounts if you need to.

- **Gluten, breads, and pastas.** Many people are allergic or sensitive to gluten without even knowing it. In 2010, Joshua discovered he was allergic to gluten after experiencing several stomach issues that gradually got worse. His doctor informed him he was allergic to gluten, which, once he eliminated it from his diet, he noticed a remarkable difference in the way he felt. Furthermore, breads and pastas (even the rare, gluten-free varieties) add unnecessary carbohydrates and sugars to your diet, which cause you to gain weight. Breads and pastas are processed foods that our bodies were not designed to digest. The two of us tend to eat rice instead of these foods.
- **Any drinks other than water.** Coffee, caffeinated tea, soda, bottled juice, et cetera—none of these things are water. Most add unnecessary calories to your diet, and they will never hydrate you like water will.
- **Dairy.** You don't have to be a vegan to live a healthy life. In fact, both of us consume small amounts of dairy from time to time (although we've drastically reduced our dairy consumption). But ask yourself a few questions: Why are humans the only animals on the planet who consume another animal's breast milk? Do you think the human digestive system is designed to digest a cow's milk? Can you remove dairy from your diet for 10 days and notice a difference?
- **Meat.** This one is sometimes controversial. We stopped eating meat as an experiment a couple years ago and noticed phenomenal results, so we never went back (other than fish, which we discuss in the following sections). The best advice we can give you is to test it yourself—stop eating meat for at least 10 days and notice the difference it makes. Then decide for yourself.

## **Incorporate More**

We replaced the foods we reduced or eliminated by adding healthier alternatives that we enjoy.



- **Water.** We recommend drinking at least half your bodyweight in ounces of water every day. If you weigh 200 pounds, drink at least 100 ounces of water.
- **Green drinks.** Want a boost in your energy? Not getting your daily veggies? Drink a green drink. We like Healthforce Vitamineral Green, Kyo-Green, and Amazing Green (Berry Flavor). Just mix a tablespoon with 10 ounces of water, drink it, and feel the difference. We drink at least two or three every day. You'll notice a difference in energy and vitality right away. Green drink also helps you fend off hunger, keeping you from overeating.
- **Fresh juices.** Get yourself a juicer and use it daily. It is worth the investment. The best juicer we've found is the Omega J8004 Masticating Juicer. It does the best job juicing green vegetables (plus everything else: veggies, fruits, children's toys—you name it, it will juice it). Or, the Hamilton Beach 67650 Juice Extractor is a less expensive option (albeit not as powerful as the Omega). Can't afford a juicer? Sell your junk and buy one—we're certain the juicer will add more value to your life than your stuff.
- **Vegetables.** Vegetables are low in calories and high in essential vitamins and nutrients. Eat as many non-starchy vegetables as you want—they are good for you.
- **Beans and legumes.** Beans and legumes add healthy proteins and carbohydrates to your diet. They also help you feel full and satisfied so you don't overeat.
- **Fruits.** Fruits are a bit tricky. They are healthy—filled with necessary vitamins, acids, and water—but they also contain a lot of natural sugar. Thus, a couple pieces of fruit per day can be a healthy alternative to sweets, but we also recommend you reduce your fruit consumption if it is one of your primary sources of food.
- **Fish.** Fish, such as salmon, contains important omega-3 fatty acids, which have been scientifically proven to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease. Omega-3 fatty acids also help maintain healthy triglyceride levels. Furthermore, fish is a great source of protein. That said, we recommend avoiding certain bottom-feeders (shrimp, crab, lobster, etc.) because they are essentially the garbage men of the sea, eating every dead thing that sinks to the bottom.
- **Organic foods.** Organic foods are free of pesticides and other

chemicals, so it makes sense to consume foods that are organic when presented with the option—the less chemicals you put in your body, the better.

- **Supplements and vitamins.** A daily multi-vitamin and a daily fish-oil supplement can help you get any essential vitamins you were missing before.

## Special Diets

Again, we're not asking you to live by some strict diet. Nor do we subscribe to any one particular dietary lifestyle as the end-all-be-all in terms of dietary health. Rather, we believe that different people have different dietary needs, thus we encourage you to experiment with different elements of your diet until you find the results you're looking for (i.e., until you feel better, until you feel healthy). In addition to the above mentioned foods to avoid, reduce, eliminate, and incorporate, here are examples of five diets from which we've seen great results.

- **Vegetarianism.** Most people are familiar with vegetarianism, though there is an entire continuum of vegetarianism. At its fundament, a vegetarian diet consists of no meat, but might include other animal products like dairy and eggs.
- **Veganism.** A vegan's diet doesn't include animal products (meat, dairy, eggs, honey, etc.). We both experimented with a strict vegan diet for one year (it was a bet between the two of us—long story), and the results were astounding: we felt more energy, Ryan lost a considerable amount of weight, Joshua maintained a healthy weight, and, most importantly, we both felt better on this diet. Since that experiment, we decided to incorporate some dairy, eggs, and fish back into our diets, which leads us to the next diet.
- **Pescatarianism.** This is essentially the diet to which we both adhere currently. Pescatarians are basically vegetarians who eat fish. We also consume some dairy products, albeit significantly less than we used to.
- **Paleo or Primal.** Although neither of us subscribe to this diet (because we don't eat meat), we have some friends who have had tremendous results from some form of a paleo or primal diet. The Paleo Diet

mimics the types of foods most people on earth ate prior to the Agricultural Revolution (a mere 500 generations ago). These foods (fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and seafood) are high in the beneficial nutrients that promote good health. The Paleo Diet is low in the foods and nutrients (refined sugars and grains, dairy, trans fats, salt, high-glycemic carbohydrates, and processed foods) that frequently cause weight gain, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and numerous other health problems. The Paleo Diet encourages dieters to replace dairy and grain products with fresh fruits and vegetables—foods that are more nutritious than whole grains or dairy products. For more information visit [paleoplan.com](http://paleoplan.com). Also, see our friend Matt Madeiro's documented progress on the primal plan (including pictures of his progress) at [threenewleaves.com/my-primal-progress-with-pictures](http://threenewleaves.com/my-primal-progress-with-pictures).

- **Intermittent fasting.** Intermittent fasting is a pattern of eating that alternates between periods of fasting (consuming only water) and non-fasting. For example, a person who intermittently fasts might not eat for 16 hours per day and then eat two or three meals within an eight hour window during the day. Thus, any of the four above mentioned dietary lifestyles could apply to intermittent fasting. People who attempt this diet (even for 10 days) typically see wonderful results. As we were editing this book, Joshua started adhering to this diet and saw incredible results in about a week—less body fat, a flatter stomach, and more toned muscles. Martin Berkhan has achieved unbelievable results with this diet (including muscle-mass results far beyond the scope of this book). You can read more about intermittent fasting and see Martin Berkhan's story at [leangains.com](http://leangains.com).

## Developing Daily Food Habits

Most drastic dietary changes fail long-term. That's because they are overwhelming, so people find them too hard to stick to. Instead of establishing a diet plan, we encourage you to change your diet for 10 days at a time. Anyone can change for 10 days, right? Experiment with the aforementioned dietary lifestyles (not diet plans) and adhere to the diet that is right for you. Your diet is not something you do; it is the way you live your life with respect to food

consumption, which means that it's also not something you "come off of" either. Your dietary lifestyle is a permanent change, not something you do for a temporary period of time.

Thus, your diet is marked by the daily habits by which you live. Once you adopt a healthy dietary lifestyle, you will feel better, and your body will thank you. Food should be treated as nutrition, not as entertainment.

## **Medicine, Drugs, and Chemicals**

Take a look at your medicine cabinet. What kind of medication do you take? How many pills per day? Why do you take it? Are there alternatives? If so, have you tested those alternatives for yourself? If the doctor prescribed you something, did you ask why? Did you ask for a second opinion?

Or worse: Do you smoke? Consume too much alcohol? Use drugs regularly? If so, why?

Your two authors would be remiss if we didn't at least scratch the surface on this topic and ask you to ask yourself these questions. Some medications are absolutely important and lifesaving, but many medications—complete with their laundry list of side-effects—are unnecessary and can be avoided with proper diet and exercise. Furthermore, if you're doing things that damage your body, then *you* will pay the price for it.

## **What You Do with Your Body**

We all know that sitting on the couch, eating potato chips, and watching TV isn't the path to a healthy lifestyle. But there is a common misconception that you must live on the other side of the exercise continuum to be healthy—as if you must run five miles every day, go to the gym four days a week, and be able to bench press a small European vehicle to be fit. But this isn't true.

## **Defining Exercise**

We aren't concerned with looking like body builders with our vanity muscles bulging through our shirts. Instead, we're concerned about being healthy, being fit, and feeling good about our physical fitness. Over the last few years, we've tried several things that have worked for us (and many other things that haven't), and during this time we determined that the most important measurements of success were not measured in pounds on a scale, but rather by two things:

1. Are we constantly improving our fitness?
2. Are we happy with our progress?

That's how we measure our success. Because, face it, you could lose all the weight you want but still not be happy with your physical fitness. In fact, this happened to Joshua.

Through a combination of pescatarianism and intermittent fasting, Joshua lost 70 pounds over a two-year span. On the surface this sounds great, and it certainly was a good thing. But, by age 28, even though he was 70 pounds lighter, he was flabby, doughy, and weak. But over two years, he developed small, simple daily habits that transformed him into the best shape of his life by age 30.

## Daily Exercise Habits

We've both tried a bunch of different exercise techniques to improve our health over the last two years. We've gone to the gym four to six times per week. We've attempted running, lifting weights, playing sports, and a ton of other ways to exercise. And the good news is that they all work. Granted, some work better than others, but every exercise we've done has been better than doing nothing at all (which, often, was what we did before—nothing).

After experimenting with different exercises for two years and speaking with several personal trainers, Joshua wrote about the daily exercise habits he had developed in an essay titled “18 Minute Minimalist Exercises.” That essay outlined his simple exercise habits, including the three principles and four exercises he embraces daily.

## Joshua's Exercise Principles

1. **Enjoying exercise.** I only do exercises I enjoy. I don't enjoy running, so I don't do it. I attempted it for about six months and discovered it wasn't for me. If you see me running, call the police, because someone is chasing me. Instead, I find other ways to do cardio: I walk every single day, I get on the elliptical machine at the gym, I do bodyweight exercises that incorporate cardio.
2. **Exercise relieves stress.** I use exercise as my number one means to

kill stress. I love hitting the gym (or the park) in the evenings if I feel tense or stressed. Exercising at the end of a long, stressful day always gives me time in solitude to reflect on what's important.

3. **Variety keeps exercise fresh.** When I first started exercising, I used to hit the gym three times per week, which was certainly better than not exercising at all. Then, as I got more serious, I started going to the gym daily—about six times per week (even when I was working 70 hours a week). This routine became incredibly time consuming, and doing the same thing over and over eventually caused me to plateau. These days I mix it up: I walk quite a bit every day, and I still got to the gym one or two times a week, but the thing that has made the biggest, most noticeable difference has been the variety of my daily 18-minute exercises.

## Joshua's 18 Minute Exercises

Honestly, 18 minutes sounds like an arbitrary number—that's because it is. When I started these bodyweight exercises, I didn't have a specific window of time in mind. But I timed myself and discovered that almost every time I hit the park for my exercises, I was worn out within 18 minutes. Thus, these are my 18-minute exercises (all of which exercises you can do in your living room, outdoors, or just about anywhere else—even outside during a thunderstorm).

During my 18 minutes, I usually alternate between the following exercises. You can of course pepper in your own favorite exercises as well. And, yes, these exercises are suitable for men and women.

1. **Push-ups.** Like I said, two years ago I couldn't do a push-up. Eventually I could do one push-up (after doing modified push-ups for a while). After a while, I could do 10 and then 20. Now I can do 100 or so, consecutively. I tend to do three to five sets, resulting in roughly 300 push-ups within my 18 minutes.
2. **Pull-ups.** Two years ago I thought I'd never be able to do a pull-up. I learned how to eventually do one pull-up by hanging from a pull-up bar, slowly building my strength. Soon I could do two pull-ups and then four. I can do 30 in a row now. I do three to five sets, resulting in

roughly 100 pull-ups within my 18 minutes. I often use monkey bars at the park. You can use a pull-up bar at home. Leo Babauta uses tree branches. I used to hate pull-ups, but now it's my favorite exercise.

3. **Squats.** I recently started doing bodyweight squats, and I've already noticed a huge difference. I'm only doing three or four sets of 20 right now, but I'll continue to work my way up, and I'll continue to grow.
4. **Shoulder presses.** I use two 20-pound dumbbells for shoulder presses. You can use smaller or larger weights, or any random object with a little weight (e.g., a large bag of rice or a couple gallons of water). I tend to do two to four sets, resulting in roughly 50 shoulder presses.

I don't have a specific routine or plan, I just take a 30-second break between sets, bouncing from one exercise to the next. After about 18 minutes, I'm completely spent, and I feel great afterward. I get that incredible tired feeling you get after a great workout. What used to be tedious is now exhilarating.

You can work your way up, even if you can't do a single pull-up or push-up. Everyone has 18 minutes per day to focus on his or her health, right?

## Sleep

People often forgo sleep to "accomplish" whatever it is they want to accomplish. But if it is your desire to live a healthy life—in the optimal condition to experience and enjoy life—then you will need enough rest.

We believe the amount of sleep your body requires varies by individual. Some of the most compelling studies we've read show that you should average eight to ten hours of sleep every night. The best essay we've seen about sleep can be found here: *How to Get Smarter, Sleep More, and Get More Sex* by Julien Smith at [inoveryourhead.net/sleep-is-awesome/](http://inoveryourhead.net/sleep-is-awesome/)

## The Musts of Health

We strongly believe in turning your *shoulds* into *musts*. When you want to change a habit—be it diet, exercise, or anything else—this is the tipping point, this is the point in which you create enough leverage, this is the point in which something you put off becomes urgent, necessary, vital. This is the point at which change becomes a *must*.

On our website, we encourage people to create *must* lists for various areas of

their lives (i.e., we encourage you to create a list of things on which you have procrastinated, and turn those *shoulds* into *musts*—find leverage so you can take action). There are very few *musts* with respect to your health, and these *musts* are fairly broad:

- You *must* eat a nutritional diet to be healthy.
- You *must* exercise regularly to be healthy.
- You *must* drastically reduce or eliminate consumption of harmful substances.
- You *must* treat your body like it is your most precious possession—because it is.

We encourage you to create your own *must* list. What *must* you do to experience a better, healthier life?



## CHAPTER 3: RELATIONSHIPS

### **The Importance of Relationships**

Your relationships are the most important of the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. Don't believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, getting into the best shape of your life, paying off all your debt, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), and not needing to work another day in your life.

Now imagine you wake up tomorrow and you have nobody to share your new life with. No friends. No family. No loved ones. Oh, the heartache. You finally got "everything you ever wanted," but there's no one to share it with. Without your relationships, you are unable to live a meaningful life.

### **Defining Relationships**

Sometimes people use the word *relationship* to connote a physical or intimate relationship, but for the purposes of this book, we use a much broader definition: Your relationships are the people with whom you have frequent contact, the people around you—friends, partners, spouses, intimate relationships, roommates, co-workers, acquaintances, or anyone with whom you interact on a regular basis.

The bottom line is that we all want to be loved. We all want to love. And we all want to have other people with whom we share our experiences. Some of us (especially extroverts like Ryan) desire the love and attention of many relationships (his family, his close friends, his girlfriend, the people he mentors, etc.), while others (especially introverts like Joshua) desire the close connections of a select few relationships. Neither desire is right or wrong; your desire is simply based on your preferences, and no matter who you are, we all need our personal relationships to thrive.

### **Reflecting on Past Relationships**

The past does not equal the future. Living in the past is tantamount to driving using only the rearview mirror—eventually you will crash if you don't know

what's going on in front of you.

Because of this, your past relationships aren't necessarily indicative of your future relationships. This is good news. Much of the time you don't think about why you're involved in a particular relationship; you just ended up there and accept that this is where you are, even when the relationship makes you unhappy.

You can learn from your past relationships though. The good times tell us what went well and give us a strategy by which you can model your future. And the bad times help you to identify how things went wrong and give you clues and social cues by which you can avoid bad relationships in the future. Everything is clearer in retrospect.

## **Three Ways to Create Better Relationships**

There are three ways to create better relationships:

1. You can find great new relationships.
2. You can transform your current relationships.
3. You can change who you are.

We will focus on all three possibilities with respect to your relationships throughout this chapter.

## **Evaluating Current Relationships**

It's time to take an honest look at your current relationships. Do they make you happy? Do they satisfy you? Are they supportive? Do they help you grow? Do they contribute to your life in positive, meaningful ways? These are all important questions to consider while evaluating your current relationships.

**Praxis:** Make a three-column list of every relationship—big or small—in which you are involved:

1. **Name.** The first column will contain the person's name. Fill in this column first. Think of every person with whom you interact regularly. Your family, close friends, significant other, co-workers, bosses, teachers, that guy seven

cubicles over who picks his nose when he thinks nobody's looking. Think about every aspect of your life. With whom do you interact? You might have 20 people in this column or you might have 400. Either way, spend some time and create your list.

2. **Signifiers.** Once the first column is complete, the second column will contain one of three signifiers for each person: *primary*, *secondary*, or *periphery*.

- The *primary* relationships, good or bad, are your closest relationships. This tier most likely includes your significant other, immediate and closest family members, and extremely close friends. Your *primary* relationships are the main characters in the movie of your life.
- The *secondary* tier consists of similar relationships as the *primary* tier, except these relationships are of less value for a variety of reasons. Such relationships might include your close friends, your boss, a select few co-workers, and extended family members. Your *secondary* relationships are your supporting cast.
- Chances are that the vast majority of the people in your life will fall into the third category: the *periphery*. The *periphery* might include people like most co-workers, neighbors, members of your community, acquaintances, distant family members, and the like. These are the minor characters (and, occasionally, the extras) in your life's cast. You tend to respect their opinions and find at least some value in these relationships.

3. **Effect.** The third and final column on your list has to do with the effects of your relationships on your life. One of three effects go in this column: *positive*, *negative*, or *neutral*.

- Your positive relationships are relationships that make you happy and help you grow.
- Negative relationships make you unhappy, unfulfilled, and dissatisfied; they can stunt your personal growth.
- Neutral relationships are somewhere between positive and negative; they don't necessarily make you unhappy and most of the time you feel ambivalent towards the emotions you feel from these relationships.
- It's important to note that many close, *primary* relationships can be neutral or negative. That doesn't mean those relationships can't possibly change, but just because someone is extremely close to you

doesn't mean they foster a positive relationship—some of the most pernicious negative relationships reside in our top two tiers. Conversely, although many of your *periphery* relationships will fall into the neutral category, other relationships in that tier might bring you great pleasure, resulting in a *positive periphery* relationship.

## What to Do with Your Current Relationships

Once your list is complete, look it over and answer some important questions:

- How many relationships do you have?
- Why so many (or so few)?
- What percentage are *primary* relationships?
- What percentage are *secondary* relationships?
- What percentage are *periphery* relationships?
- What percentage are positive relationships?
- What percentage are negative relationships?
- What percentage are neutral relationships?

Once you answer these questions, it's time to divide and conquer. It's obvious that your most important relationships—be it negative or positive—are in your top two tiers, with the most important residing in the *primary* tier. But unfortunately, because the majority of your relationships reside in the periphery, you most likely allocate the majority of your time to those people. Consequently, you focus most of your time, effort, and attention on the group of people that matters least to you.

This needs to change.

First, take a look at everyone in your *periphery* tier. Are some of these individuals people you'd like to see play a larger role in your life? Are they the people you'd like to have in your *primary* or *secondary* tiers? If so, what actions do you need to take to strengthen these relationships? What actions must you take to help them grow? Take a moment and consider these relationships.

Once you've discovered the *periphery* relationships you'd like to move into

your top two tiers, it's important to realize the role of the remaining people in your *periphery* group. These are people you care about, people you wish great things for, but they are also people who consume the majority of your most precious commodity—your time. Thus, it is imperative that you dedicate less time to this group and focus your attention towards your *primary* and *secondary* tiers (including those people in the *periphery* whom you want to move into those tiers). For some people, this might mean saying *no* more often, or turning down future commitments. For others, it might require a sit-down meeting explaining that you need your time back to focus on other aspects of your life. The idea here is to focus on creating the most meaningful relationships possible—relationships that will reside in your top two tiers.

Similarly, there are certain people in your *primary* and *secondary* tiers who likely don't belong there. It is up to you to decide which role these people play in your lives. This is especially true for the relationships you labeled as *negative* relationships for the people in these tiers.

Your relationships will not remain static for the rest of your life. People will constantly shift in and out of your life and around in your relationship tiers as you grow and they grow. Many people who were incredibly relevant for you 10 years ago are far less relevant today, right? Likewise, your future relationships will continue to shift, change, and grow. But it's important you play an active part in this process—that you're actively engaged in your relationship selection—which often includes making some difficult decisions about the people in your top two tiers.

## **The Most Important Relationships**

Your *primary* relationships are by far the most important relationships in your life. This is your core team—the people who are most important to you. The rest of this chapter will be focused on these *primary* relationships (present and future *primary* relationships). These are the people you love, the people for whom you would do anything. These relationships typically include:

- **Intimate relationships.** Your lover, partner, spouse, significant other. This is typically the most important relationship in your life, and it should be treated accordingly.
- **Closest friends.** We often call these people our best friend or friends.

This group of closest friends usually consists of fewer than five people with whom you are incredibly close and care about deeply. That thing your parents said about counting your closest friends on one hand is generally true.

- **Immediate family.** Parents, children, and other close family members fall into this category.

A note about your *secondary* relationships: Your *secondary* relationships are important as well (vastly more important than your *periphery* relationships), but should only receive your time and attention once your commitment to your *primary* relationships is fulfilled. You must treat your *primary* relationships as your top priority. This might mean shifting one or two people from your *secondary* tier into your *primary* tier (or vice versa) if necessary.

## **Change Yourself, Not Others**

You can't change the people around you, but you can change the people around you.

Sometimes you have to get rid of certain relationships, even relationships of great value. Sometimes a person's beliefs or values are radically different than yours. When this is the case it's okay to terminate the relationship or at least change the terms of the relationship.

We all change over time. Sometimes we grow closer to certain people, sometimes we grow apart, sometimes we fall out of love, sometimes we change together. Just because someone has changed, doesn't mean they don't love you, it doesn't mean they don't care about you immensely; it just means they've changed.

Moreover, you cannot expect a person to change in every way you want them to change. Of course, some people make radical changes in their lives, but it is not your responsibility in any relationship to expect someone to change to adhere to your standards, beliefs, or values.

The only person you can change is yourself. When you change yourself—when you lead by example—often times the people closest to you will follow suit. If you change your diet, start exercising, start paying close attention to your important relationships, and set higher relationship standards, then you'll notice other people doing the same thing. If the best version of you shows up to the

party, you'll be able to bring the best out of other people.

Unfortunately, there will be times when certain relationships don't work—be it marriages, intimate relationships, close friendships, employee-boss relationships, relationships with family members, etc. The best thing you can do is change yourself (not attempt to change the other person). You don't have to stay in a relationship if you are unhappy. That doesn't mean you shouldn't make an effort to get to the root of the relationship's problems—it means that you can change the relationship if it is not working.

Before you change or terminate a relationship, you should get a vision of what you'd like it to look like in the future. The following sections discuss specific ideas on how to envision a new future for your relationships.

## **Relationship Growth**

Suffice it to say, no matter how positive or negative your current relationships are, you want them to improve so you have outstanding future relationships. Even the greatest relationships need to grow to remain great. In fact, the best relationships are always growing—that's one of the reasons they're so great. If your relationships aren't growing, they're dying. But when your relationships grow, you feel alive.

## **Seeking & Selecting Future Relationships**

Without a vision, people perish. We've all heard that before. The same is true for our relationships, especially our *primary* relationships. Without a vision, you will settle for whatever is in front of you. Thus, you need a compelling vision of what you want your relationships to be, what you want your relationships to look like. If your vision is compelling enough, you'll do anything to make it happen.

There are three things to consider when seeking new relationships (or improving your current relationships):

1. **What do you really want?** At the surface, this seems like a fairly vapid question, but it is of the utmost importance. Write down everything you want from your *primary* relationships (intimate relationships, close friendships, and the like). What do they look like? What do you want to do together? What do you want from them mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally? What types of desires

must these people have? What are their beliefs, values, rules, fears?

2. **What must *not* occur within the relationship?** You can find everything you want in a person, but if they also carry a belief or value you must not have in your life, it can ruin the entire relationship. For example, say you find an intimate relationship and the other person appears to have everything you wanted above, except he or she is unsupportive. If an unsupportive person is something you must not have, then that relationship will not work long-term. Go ahead, make your list of things that must not occur in your relationships.
3. **Who do you need to become to attract this kind of person?** Once you've determined what you want and what you must not have, you must determine what changes you'll need to make within yourself to attract this kind of person as a friend, lover, or whatever relationship you are looking for. Must you listen more? Must you get into better shape? Must you learn how to better communicate? Write down what you'll need to change in your life to attract these new relationships.

Once you've answered these three questions, read this list daily. It's important to know what you're looking for, what you want to avoid, and what you need to change within yourself to get these results.

## **Making Passionate Relationships Work**

Commonalities make relationships work, but *differences* make relationships exciting and passionate. You need both—commonalities and differences—to make passionate relationships work long-term.

Sometimes people enter into a relationship based solely on chemistry. Chemistry is typically associated with variety, and it's great at first. It's easy to be attracted to someone because they are different. Unfortunately, chemistry alone is not sustainable. Over time, too many differences can become annoying, frustrating, and troublesome. And as we mentioned earlier, some differences in areas like values, beliefs, and individual needs can completely destroy a relationship in the long-run.

Conversely, sharing a lot of commonalities with someone sounds great, but having too many things in common becomes boring. Being just like someone else lacks the variety you need to keep your relationship passionate. Too often a



relationship falls apart because, instead of working together as a team, the two people become extensions of each other, appendages that get in the way.

The best relationships share a healthy combination of commonalities and differences. While you embrace the things you have in common, you can also learn to respect and enjoy your differences. Doing so will allow you to experience the balance of certainty and variety necessary for a sustainable, meaningful relationship.

## **Eight Fundaments of Great Relationships**

Meaningful relationships have eight main elements that must be nurtured for the relationships to grow and improve over time: love, understanding, trust, honesty, caring, support, time, and authenticity. The following eight sections discuss each of these fundaments.

### **Love**

It is possible to dislike certain parts of a person and still love every piece of them. Your *primary* relationships require immense amounts of love. If you truly love someone, what are you willing to do for them? Anything! You should be willing to bend over backwards, to go to great lengths for the people you love. That's how you strengthen your relationships.

Furthermore, being loved is different than being needed. You should, however, work hard to understand what your loved ones need. And the *primary* relationships in your life should feel the same way towards you. If they don't, you must ask yourself if that person is worthy of being one of your *primary* relationships and the time you must dedicate to said relationships.

### **Understanding**

When you understand someone, you are able to feel what they are feeling. What drives the other person? What do they want? What do they need? What excites them? What are their desires? What are their pains? What do they enjoy? What makes them happy?

If you can't answer these questions, then how are you going to meet their needs? Sometimes the things that people ask for are not what they need, but if you are meeting someone's needs, then you're guaranteed to have a vibrant, passionate, growing relationship.

### **Trust**

When you absolutely trust someone, you are open, you are the real you, which fosters the closest possible relationship. Trust breeds more trust, which encourages habitual honesty from both parties.

## **Honesty**

To lie is to intentionally mislead someone when they expect honest communication. Sometimes it feels like it's easier to lie, but no matter the circumstance—no matter how small or big the lie is—lying is wrong and harmful to your relationships.

“Honesty is a gift we can give others. It is also a source of power and an engine of simplicity,” Dr. Sam Harris wrote in his book, *LYING*. He continued by stating, “Knowing that we will attempt to tell the truth, whatever the circumstances, leaves us with little to prepare for. We can simply be ourselves.”

Thus, not only is being honest the right thing to do in your relationships, it is also much simpler in the long run. And if a relationship can't be honestly maintained, then it isn't a relationship worth having.

## **Caring & Respect**

This is the other side of trust. Respecting someone is the ultimate way to contribute to your relationship in a meaningful way. Respect means that you care enough about someone to express it through your consistent actions of admiration and appreciation. Respect is how you show someone you care.

Call it compassion, call it sympathy, call it empathy—but whatever you call it, we all value someone who genuinely cares about us, about our feelings, about our lives.

## **Support**

The strongest relationships are mutually supportive relationships. Meaning, not only do you care about the other person, but you are genuinely excited when they're excited, you're genuinely happy that they're happy, and you encourage them to grow as an individual as you grow, allowing you to grow together.

## **Time, Presence, & Attentiveness**

Much of the time, especially on our website, we talk about the importance of being present, of living in the moment. This is especially true with your relationships. If these people are important enough to be in your top tier of relationships, then they are important enough to merit your undivided attention.

These people require your full attention when you are engaged with them. No cellphone. No instant messaging. No texting. No watching the TV in your peripheral vision. Your relationships are important and they need to be treated accordingly. Hang on to their every word. You'll be surprised with the reaction you get from people when you give them your *full* attention.

## **Authenticity**

Be an example through your actions. The strongest example for a great relationship is displayed by people who are utterly genuine—people who are authentic.

Authentic people are refreshing. We want to get to know these people, because we feel safe around authentic people, as if we could reveal to them our deepest, darkest secrets, as if we could trust them with anything.

Be authentic. Doing so brings out the best in you, which, in turn, brings out the best in your relationships.

## **Nourish Your Relationships**

You must find ways to continuously nourish your *primary* relationships every day. They are far too important to ignore. If you focus on the above eight fundamentals, you will strengthen your relationships more than you ever thought was possible. Sure, it takes a considerable amount of work, focus, and attention, but having incredibly meaningful relationships in your life is worth every bit of work you put into it.

## CHAPTER 4: PASSIONS

### **The Importance of Pursuing Your Passions**

The pursuit of your passions is the most important of the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. Don't believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, getting into the best shape of your life, finding your soulmate, establishing the most meaningful relationships possible, paying off all your debt, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), and not needing to work another day in your life.

Now imagine you wake up tomorrow and the next day and the next day with nothing to do, nothing to be excited about, nothing to fuel your fire. Oh, the horror. There are only so many TV shows you can watch or vacations you can take before you realize passion is missing from your life, before you realize your life lacks meaning. Unless you're doing something with your life you're passionate about, you will not feel fulfilled, you will not experience a meaningful life. This is often the root cause of that empty feeling so many people experience.

### **What You Call Your Work**

Back to reality. Let's take a look at your average day. How do you spend it? In other words, what do you do for work? Do you work the typical 9-to-5? Do you stay at home with the kids? Do you run your own business?

Whatever you do, the level of passion you have for what you do can be measured by the label you give your work. People tend to designate one of three labels to their work: *job*, *career*, or *mission*. When you speak about your work, which term do you use? Do you have a job? Do you have a career? Or are you one of the few who calls your work your mission?

Chances are you have a *job*. You have the daily grind. Or, if you're unemployed, you're probably looking for a *job*. It's a cultural imperative, the American Dream, it's what we're taught to do. We're taught to work incredibly hard in high school or college, doing stuff we don't care much about, then find a good job, one with reliable pay, good benefits, and maybe a retirement plan.

We're taught to work a soul-crushing job for more than forty years so one day we might actually be able to retire and enjoy our lives for three years (insurance actuary studies have shown that the average life span of a retiree is about three years after retirement). We're taught to work incredibly hard for a non-living entity, donating our most precious commodity (our time) for a paycheck. We're taught that there is much more value in that paycheck—and all the stuff that paycheck can buy us—than there is in actuality.

The truth is we all need money to live. There's no doubt that we all need to pay for a place to live, food to nourish our bodies, clothes to keep us warm, medical care when we're sick or injured, and various other essentials. But the aforementioned cycle—this thing we've been told is the American Dream—is void of meaning. The American Dream is not going to make you happy. In fact, for many, the pursuit of this set of ideals is oppressive and is guaranteed to be a losing enterprise.

## **The Ugly Roots of a Career**

If what you do everyday is just a job, then, by definition, you won't be able to live a meaningful life. Even if you work really, really hard and establish a career for yourself, you won't be able to live a meaningful life either. In fact, having a career is one of the most dangerous things you can do if you want to find meaning in your life.

Careers are dangerous because people invest so much of themselves into their careers that they establish an identity and a social status based upon where they work and what they do for a living.

Think about it: one of the first things a person asks you when you're becoming acquainted is *What do you do?* On the surface, this seems like an innocent enough question, doesn't it? But the implied question isn't *What do you do?* which by itself is rather expansive and could encompass thousands of things (*I volunteer at soup kitchens, I work at Walmart, I enjoy fishing on the weekends, I exercise five days a week, I drink water, etc.*); the implied question is *What do you do for a living?* or *Where do you work?* which is vastly different than the question itself. This “innocent” question actually says, *I will judge you as a person by however you make your money, and I will assign a particular social status to you based on your occupation.*

People have to answer this question so often that they become rooted in their careers—they establish “what they do” as their core identity and give their occupations far more societal worth than they deserve. Once someone

establishes their career as who they are as a person, it is incredibly hard to shed that identity, even if the person hates their career (*I don't want to work here, but this is just who I am!*).

Thankfully, there are better ways to answer the *What do you do?* question. We have found that people are programmed to ask this question without giving it any thought; it's not much different than asking *How are you doing?* So the best thing to do is to get the other person to actually think about the mindless question they just posited. Whenever presented with this question, the two of us tend to answer with another question, such as, "That's a rather expansive question. What do you mean by it?" or "That's a rather expansive question; perhaps we could discuss it over a cup of coffee."

Another way to answer this question is by stating what you're passionate about, instead of spouting off what your vocation is. So, instead of saying, "I'm a Director of Operations," say, "I'm passionate about writing [or scrap-booking or rock climbing or whatever you're passionate about]." It's nice to follow-up that statement with, "What are you passionate about?" Such a response completely redirects the conversation, changing its trajectory from *what you do* to *what you're both passionate about*, which is far more interesting.

Such responses immediately cause the person to reconsider the question, while at the same time help you remember that you are far more than your career. You are a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, a spouse, a lover, a healthy person, a growing person, a contributing person, a passionate person with a meaningful life. You are not your career.

By changing your own thought process around this question, you can dig out those pernicious roots that every career has. Over time you can remove your identity from your career and into its appropriate place—your life. Your meaningful life should be your identity, not how you earn a paycheck.

## **Joshua & Ryan's Passions**

Whether you follow our website or were just introduced to our writing with this book, you know our story by now. You know we worked fancy corporate careers with fancy titles and sizable paychecks. But therein lies a clue: we had *careers*. What level of passion do you think we had if we worked at our *careers* instead of living our *mission*?

Sure, we worked hard, slaving 70 or more hours a week for a corporation. Sure, we enjoyed certain aspects of our careers (viz. coaching and mentoring the large groups of people we led). And sure, we often felt fortunate to have such

“nice” careers at a young age with no college degrees. But, ultimately, we weren’t satisfied with what we did for a living. We weren’t living our mission.

We didn’t feel fulfilled by our careers, so we turned to our society’s idea of a living: we bought stuff, spent too much money, and lived paycheck to paycheck trying to purchase happiness in every trip to the shopping mall or luxurious vacation we could find. Instead of finding our passion, instead of searching for our mission, we pacified ourselves with ephemeral indulgences, inducing a crack-cocaine high that didn’t last far past the checkout line.

Eventually we discovered that our passion, and thus our mission, was waiting far beyond the sea of consumption, but first we had to remove a lot of anchors before we could navigate our way into clearer waters.

Joshua has a deep passion for reading and writing—particularly literary fiction. Ryan has a passion for mentoring and coaching people—helping them solve their problems. Once we discovered our passions, we were able to shape them into our mission over a two year period.

## **The Confluence of Passion & Mission**

It’s important to note that we don’t subscribe to the notion that working for a corporation is bad or evil. We don’t believe that to be the case.

We also don’t believe that you were meant to be passionate about one particular thing or that you have one true calling in life.

Rather, we believe you can be passionate about virtually anything. So *anything* can be your passion. Consequently, any line of work *can* be your mission. Just because something sounds banal or boring to one person doesn’t mean it’s not exciting and rewarding for another. It is perfectly plausible to think that someone can be deeply passionate about financial accounting the same way another person might be passionate about horseback riding, neither of which sound too exciting to us, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people who are passionate about both.

Occasionally, people stumble into a line of work that brings them ultimate satisfaction. These people who are paid to do what they love tend to refer to their work as their mission. Is that you? If so, congratulations—you are one of the few. If you don’t, however, feel grateful and passionate about the day’s work, then chances are you have not found (or are not pursuing) your mission.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to helping you find your passions and pursue your mission.

This journey is incredibly easy for some people. These people already know

what they're passionate about, but perhaps aren't yet pursuing that passion as their full-time mission.

Conversely, this journey is sometimes the hardest part for other people. Some people don't know what they want to do, they don't know what they're passionate about, they have no clue what their mission is.

No matter where you fall on this continuum, the rest of this chapter will help you identify the anchors that are holding you back from discovering and/or pursuing your passions.

## **A Misconception About Passionate People**

A common misconception is that people who are passionate about what they do are inherently that way, as if they wake up every day feeling optimistic and passionate about the hours ahead. That misconception is illogical—it couldn't be further from the truth.

People who are passionate about what they do are in most ways just like people who aren't passionate about their work. Some days passionate people don't want to get out of bed, sometimes they don't feel like starting work on the new project that's looming in front of them. Other days they jump out of bed feeling excited and motivated by their mission. In other words, passionate people are just like you.

## **Passion Fuels More Passion**

There are, however, two distinct differences that distinguish passionate people from uninspired people.

First, passionate people know what they are passionate about. Boiled down to that last sentence, this statement might sound obvious and trite, but truth be told, no one is passionate about just one thing. Joshua isn't passionate about only writing; he's passionate about contributing to other people, and he's passionate about living a healthy life, among other things. Similarly, Ryan isn't passionate about only mentoring people; he's passionate about growing as an individual and constantly improving his life and various other pursuits. Passionate people know what they are most passionate about, they know what else they are passionate about, they know what gets them excited, what gets them energized, what gets them into a peak state.

Second, passion fuels more passion. Passionate people turn to their passions when they aren't feeling inspired. On those days when they don't want to get out of bed or start that new project, passionate people focus on the things that get



them excited. For example, there were times during the creation of this book—particularly while editing the first three drafts—that seemed especially dull and monotonous. Instead of waiting to be inspired by a sudden burst of passionate activity, we chose to continue our trek through the murky waters of monotony, all the while keeping an eye on what we knew we were passionate about. In fact, it was our passions that acted as a beacon in the night—by dredging through the tedium, we were able to stay focused on what was important. Without our passions guiding us, it would have been easy to veer off course and never return. By the end of the fourth draft of this book, we were both excited about our creation and what it would mean to the people we shared it with.

Using what you're passionate about to keep you focused and fuel more passion is a critical part in discovering your mission. But first you must discover what you're passionate about.

## **Removing Anchors to Find Your Passion**

It is often difficult to discover your passions because you're stuck in the vapid muck of your daily routine. It's easy to embrace the uninspiring, lifeless cycle of your everyday work. Lather, rinse, repeat. It seems too easy. That's because it is too easy. It's easy to get anchored down by our daily lives, and it's much harder to free yourself of those anchors.

As it turns out, we discovered four main anchors in our own lives that were keeping us from pursuing our passions: identity, status, certainty, and money.

## **Removing the Anchor of Identity**

*Who are you?* Have you ever sat down and thought about this question? On the surface, it sounds fairly simple, but in reality it's an expansive question, and it's not an easy one to answer. Because of the complexity of this question, we often turn to our vocation for an answer: I'm a teacher, I'm an accountant, I'm a sales manager, I'm a stay-at-home mom. While all these answers are acceptable answers to a different question (i.e., *What do you do to earn a paycheck?* or *How do you spend the majority of your time?*), they become problematic when we give these labels enough meaning to say *That's who I am as a person.*

Once you acknowledge that your vocation is who you are, it's extraordinarily difficult to do something else. This is one of the reasons people stay in the same industry when they change jobs (*I wasn't happy as a sales manger at ABC Paper Company, but I bet I'll be happy as a sales manager at XYZ Paper Company!*). People get so wrapped up in their vocation as their identity that it's hard for them

to realize they are so much more—they are beautiful in so many ways.

When you're trapped in this kind of identity, it's hard to realize that you are not your job, you are not your stuff, you are not your debt, you are not your paycheck—you are so much more. You are a brother, a father, a mother, a sister, a lover, a partner, a friend. You are a growing person, a contributing person, a healthy person, a person who is capable of so much more.

For the two of us, this meant actively identifying ourselves with more meaningful labels than our corporate-given titles like *director* or *manager*. It meant we had to publicly identify ourselves with meaningful labels such as *mentor*, *leader*, *contributor*, and *minimalist*.

What other meaningful labels can you use to identify yourself? Once you shed the tyranny of identity, you will clear a path that will allow you to remove your other anchors.

## **Removing the Anchor of Status**

As time goes on, as people climb their corporate ladders, as they get more tenure and familiarity and comfort in their jobs and careers, they tend to experience a strange phenomenon: they associate status with their vocation above anything else. They feel their job is what makes them important and significant. This is why so many people feel ashamed or embarrassed or insignificant or even depressed when they lose their job. Sure, they worry about money and how they're going to make a living, but after the initial panic over money subsides, they feel empty and insignificant without their job. That's because people often give significance to something that is relatively unimportant.

If you're caught in the clutches of status, it's hard for you to see that there are other aspects of your life that are far more important than your vocation (e.g., the five dimensions we cover in this book—health, relationships, passions, growth, and contribution—are all markedly more important than your job or career). People often associate an appreciable amount of status (or social *gravitas*) to their vocations, because it's the easiest thing to control in the moment. That is, if you work really hard (even if it's for a job you hate), then you're rewarded with instant gratifications (awards, rewards, praise from the boss, public recognition, private recognition, co-worker envy, co-worker sucking-up, perceived power, additional responsibilities, and the like), as well as long-term gratifications (raises, bonuses, commissions, promotions, incentives, fringe benefits, etc.).

Unfortunately, many of the most important things in life are A) much more difficult to control than short-term hard work at your job, and B) don't provide

the same instant gratifications as the status of a career. Societally, you've been programmed to want (or even expect) instant gratification. Furthermore, these same social imperatives place far more emphasis on vocational/monetary status than status of any other sort. Take, for example, a stay-at-home dad. What's the first thing that comes to your mind? Chances are it's something like, *That sure must be nice!* or *He sure is lucky!* or *He isn't even a man!* or *He is lazy!* But anyone who knows a competent stay-at-home dad knows these things are far from the truth. Conversely, when you think of a CEO you probably think *He is rich!* or *He has a lot of power!* or *He worked very hard to get there!* Et cetera. While none of these things are necessarily true, it's a cultural stereotype that is hard to escape.

The best way to escape the perniciousness of status and the cultural stereotypes that come along with it is to turn down the volume. For the two of us, this meant placing less value on what people thought about our jobs, and showing them why they should give more credence to our new identities, which were transferable to virtually anything we did, not just our careers.

Once you embrace this more positive notion of status, you will more easily be able to embrace a little more variety in your life; you will be able to embrace a little uncertainty and sacrifice some of the certainty that is anchoring you down.

## **Removing the Anchor of Certainty**

Certainty is a strange thing. Everyone needs some level of certainty to survive. You have to be certain your ceiling isn't going to collapse on you while you're sleeping, you have to be certain your drinking water isn't poisonous, you have to be certain that the car approaching you won't veer over the yellow line into your lane.

But beyond these basic needs for safety, the level of certainty people need varies drastically by individual. Most people require vast amounts of certainty—far too much certainty—to feel safe, while other people (like, for example, professional skydivers, and race car drivers) require very little certainty in their daily lives. The latter group will be able to remove the anchor of uncertainty fairly easily, but the former group will need to step outside their comfort zone to remove this debilitating anchor from their lives.

Certainty feels nice—it makes you feel comfortable, it makes you feel warm and fuzzy—but it's often the biggest underlying reason you don't make the changes you want to make in your life. That is, you're not happy with your current situation, but you're comfortable enough that you don't want to sacrifice

your comfort today for something that could potentially be less comfortable tomorrow, thus you don't change. In other words, you associate more pain with changing than you associate pleasure with the change. Fortunately, there are two ways to change this thought process—there are two ways to cut loose from the anchor of certainty so you can change your life.

First, you can find a way to associate more pain with *not* changing. You can do so by looking at the potential loss of meaning in your life—the loss of not accomplishing what you truly want to accomplish, the loss of not pursuing your passion, the loss of not living your mission. The reality is that the long-term pain of regret weighs far more than the short-term pleasure of certainty.

Second, you can associate more pleasure with the long-term fulfillment of pursuing your passions and living your mission. Either way will give you the leverage you need.

For the two of us, this meant two different things. Joshua leaped without having much of a plan. He decided that the pain of not pursuing his passions was no longer worth the certainty that his corporate career provided. Conversely, Ryan slowly eased out of his corporate restraints, slowly associating more and more pleasure with the pursuit of his passions.

## **Removing the Anchor of Money**

When you boil it down, money is simply another layer of certainty. But it's worth identifying as its own anchor—because of the stronghold it places on so many people, because of the importance our culture places on money, because it's typically the number one reason for someone doing something they hate. *I gotta pay the bills!* is a lame excuse. Of course you need to make a living, but you will be able to do so while pursuing your passion.

The best way to remove the anchor of money is to give money less importance in your life. We were able to accomplish this using the principles of minimalism. Over the course of two years we made a lot of that allowed us to let go of an attachment to money.

We recommend any of the following changes:

- Get out of debt
- Sell your house
- Get rid of cable at home

- Cancel your bills (other than utilities)
- Get rid of the internet at home
- Get rid of your TV
- Sell or donate anything you don't use
- Stop buying material possessions
- Pay off, sell, or get rid of your car
- Walk instead of drive when possible

Bear with us for a moment. We understand that many of these ideas seem far-fetched. But they aren't. Sometimes it's hard to see the forest through the trees. Sometimes it's easy to give meaning to things that pacify us in the moment (things like TV and Internet) but don't necessarily add to our long-term happiness, things that prevent us from pursuing our passions and living a more intentionally.

On our website we go into great detail about how to shed the unnecessary things in your life to focus on what's important. For more information and specific details visit [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com) and read through our essay archives.

## **The Price of Your Dreams**

When it comes to removing money's anchor, consider the price of your dreams. It turns out that the American Dream—the picket fence and the oversized house and the debt and stress that accompanies it—might not be your dream. It certainly wasn't ours. Rather, it was competing with our real dreams, clouding over our revelatory passions.

The big houses, the fancy cars, the impressive job titles, the superfluous stuff. We had all of it. But none of it made us feel happy or fulfilled. And none of it allowed us to pursue our dreams.

Instead, there was a void. And for the longest time we didn't know what that void was, and working 70–80 hours a week didn't give us much time to explore its cavernous interior.

And so before we left our corporate jobs, we had to pay the price for our self-indulgent twenties. We could no longer afford the lifestyle we'd been living, a cog in a wheel of greed and lust and happenstance. Instead, it was far more important for us to pursue our dreams—to pursue our passions of writing and contributing—than it was for us to keep living that empty, opulent lifestyle, a

lifestyle which, by the way, was *not* bringing us happiness.

Thus, pursuing our dreams didn't come without a cost. Before we left our careers to become full-time writers, speakers, and entrepreneurs, we each spent two years paying off the vast majority of our debts—credit card debt, student loans, medical bills, and the like—all the while keep our eye on the prize. Then we paid off our cars (Ryan sold his car and acquired a much cheaper vehicle), and then we sold our large houses (unable to sell his condo, Ryan rented it to a family), and we moved into a small, \$400–\$500 per month apartments. We weren't downsizing, we were uprising.

Then, over time, we gradually got rid of nearly all our bills. Joshua got rid of the internet at home. Instead of surf the 'net, he now finds more productive things to do with his time, focusing on health and relationships and the more important things in life. When he needs to use the internet, he visits the library or a coffee shop and uses it deliberately, no longer wasting hours of his life “surfing the web.” Living his dream doesn't allow time for such pillory.

We both jettisoned TV. Instead of stare at the glowing idiot box, we read or write or go to a concert or a movie with a friend, creating meaningful, lasting experiences instead of channel surfing our lives away. Living our dreams doesn't allow time for such passive nonsense.

We killed our expensive gym memberships. Now, we walk more than ever, and, of course, exercise 18 minutes a day at home or in the park.

We got rid of our extra bills. No new, expensive cars. No more satellite radio. No more Netflix. No more magazine subscriptions. Hell, Joshua even stopped buying material possessions for a year, which he wrote about on our website. Living our dreams makes our old ephemeral pleasures pale in comparison.

And now our only bills at this point are rent, utilities, and insurance. Everything else had to go. We decided that pursuing our dreams was worth it.

We now make less money than when we were 20. But we've never been happier.

That happiness didn't come without a price, though. It meant getting uncomfortable, questioning our stuff, and getting rid of the excess. It meant refocusing our finances and re-prioritizing our lives. It meant living more deliberately and intentionally. It meant we had to stop living the lie and start living the dream, moving forward with a new life of focus and passion and purpose—and far less stuff.

How about you: is your dream worth the sacrifices you need to make?

## Finding Your Passion

Once you've removed the above mentioned anchors from your life, the horizon becomes vividly clear and you can focus on finding your passion.

The first question we typically ask people is a fairly standard question: *What would you do with your life if money wasn't an object?* Most people who are searching for their passions are still deeply anchored to some (if not all) of the four anchors mentioned above, which causes them to articulate a fairly common response: *I don't know.*

If you don't know, it's likely because you're still anchored. Perhaps you're afraid of what people will say if you tell them you want to be a rodeo clown (for years Joshua never told people he wanted to be a writer, for fear of what they might think). Perhaps you're uncertain about the stability you'll have as a mascot for a professional baseball team. Perhaps you're worried you won't make enough money to feel significant. Whatever your anchors are, you must get rid of them to find your passion.

Once you've truly shed your anchors, you'll be able to answer the above question. Sometimes it's easier to answer that question if it's asked in a different way. Write down your answers to the following:

- When was the last time you felt overwhelmed with excitement?
- What were five other (different) experiences like this?
- Why were you excited each of those times?
- Which experiences were you excited about for the longest period of time?
- Was there a common thread among the things that excited you?
- What did excitement look like? (How did your physiology change in these situations? How was your posture? Your facial expressions? Your breathing? Your heart rate? What else was happening with you body?)

Once you know what excitement looks and feels like, and you're able to relate it to specific experiences that excited you, it's easier to answer the question *What would you do with your life if money wasn't an object?* Answer: *I'd do things that excited me every day.* So, what excites you the most for the longest period of

time? That is likely your passion.

Said another way, passion is one half love, one half obsession. So what would you love to do each day? What would you be obsessed by? Where those intersect, that is your passion.

Now slap on that rodeo clown outfit and let's figure out how to turn it into your mission.

## **Turning Your Passion into Your Mission**

We know what you're thinking: That's great, but no one is going to pay me to be a rodeo clown/hula dancer/[insert real passion here]. Oh, really? Maybe not with that attitude. The truth is that someone is earning a living by doing the thing you're passionate about, by doing the thing you obsessively love.

*But they just got lucky!* Well, maybe some of them got lucky, and maybe they were at the right place at the right time, but even luck has a recipe for continued success. Plus, there are hundreds of people who are pursuing *your* passion (and making a good living from it) who didn't get lucky, who didn't achieve stardom or get everything they wanted overnight. They put in a lot of work, experienced many debilitating failures and losses, and obsessively followed that beacon of passion until they were able to call it their full-time mission. Why not learn from those people?

If you want to learn how to turn your specific passion into your mission, the fastest, most efficient way to do so is to emulate someone who is already doing it. It's called *modeling* and that's exactly what we did. We saw the likes of Colin Wright, Leo Babauta, Joshua Becker, Julien Smith, and Chris Guillebeau—people who were doing what we wanted to do: writing and contributing to people in meaningful ways—and we knew they already had a recipe for success, we knew they had learned through trial and error, and thus we knew we could learn from their successes and failures. Over the course of a year we met with each of these individuals face to face—all five of whom lived thousands of miles away—and learned from their experiences. We bought them coffee or lunch and offered to add value in any way we could. We took copious notes and thanked them for adding value to our lives. We stayed in contact with these guys via email, phone, Skype, social media, etc., establishing a stronger bond over time. After meeting them and learning from their experiences, it was clear to us what we needed to do to successfully turn our passions into our mission. That's when we took action; that's when we created our website and worked incredibly hard on adding value to other people's lives through our writing and various other



content.

Your assignment is to do the same: find at least three people who are making a living doing what you're passionate about. It doesn't have to be anything similar to what we did. Your passion doesn't need to include a website or writing or online commerce. The specific nature of your passion is irrelevant. What's important is that you find some people who are doing what you want to do and you learn from them, soaking up their knowledge and then taking massive action.

## **It Ain't that Easy**

You might be thinking: *But, guys, this is all easier said than done!*

Hell yeah it's easier said than done—we know because we've done these things ourselves during the last two years. We went from being anchored by debt and status and careers we weren't passionate about to pursuing our passions and living our mission. We now make less money and we sometimes put more hours into the work week than we did at our original corporate jobs, but we now love what we do, and we obsessive over it, so it certainly doesn't feel like a job.

Of course it wasn't easy, it took a lot of action to remove those anchors, it took a lot of courage to reject certain social imperatives so we could live meaningful lives. But it was worth it, and it's worth it for you too—you deserve to pursue your passions, you deserve to live your mission, you deserve to live a meaningful life.

## CHAPTER 5: GROWTH

### **The Meaning of Life**

We saved the most important two chapters for last: Growth and Contribution. These two dimensions work hand-in-hand to form the meaning of our lives. That is to say that *the meaning of our lives is to grow as individuals and contribute to other people in meaningful ways.*

### **The Importance of Personal Growth**

Your growth as an individual is the most important of the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. Don't believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, getting into the best shape of your life, finding your soulmate, establishing the most meaningful relationships possible, paying off all your debt, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), finding the thing that makes you the most passionate, and discovering your mission in life.

Now what? Sit back and fish at the lake every day? Eat Cheetos and bask in the blueish glow of your television? Of course not. You want to continue to enjoy your newfound life—the one with the improved health, improved relationships, and newly discovered passions. Thus, you must continue to improve, you must continue to grow. If you're not growing, you're dying; and if you're dying, then, by definition, you're not *living* a meaningful life.

### **Incremental Changes**

Once you make a change in your life, the journey isn't over—you need to continue making changes if you want to be happy long-term. Think about all the changes you've already made—many of which might have seemed impossible five or ten years ago. How were you able to make those changes? Chances are you made the change one of two ways: giant leaps or baby steps.

### **Giant Leaps**

There are some changes you can make that are huge and immediate. Take, for

example, ending a relationship, quitting your job on the spot, picking up and moving to a new city, making a large purchase (a home or a car), and the like. We won't be focusing on these types of *giant leap* changes in this chapter. While sometimes these changes are absolutely necessary, there is generally only one way the *giant leaps* approach is successful: wait until the time is right and make the leap. Thus, we will focus on the most important changes in your life: the baby steps—because it's the baby steps that allow you to take the giant leaps.

## Daily Incremental Changes

Most change happens gradually, wherein you don't take a one-time giant leap, but you make small, gradual changes in your everyday life, which, over time, amount to massive changes in your life.

For example, no one goes to the gym, exercises really hard for one session, and expects to be fit for the rest of his or her life. It doesn't work that way. Similarly, most changes you make are about improving upon past changes in small ways every day.

The vast majority of the changes we've made in our lives—from our health to our jobs and our relationships—have involved these daily incremental changes. As you make these changes, your day-by-day life doesn't change, but when you look back through life's rearview mirror, everything is completely different.

## Finding Leverage

The first step in any change, big or small, is making the decision to change. We're talking about making a real decision—one in which you make the change a *must* in your life—not something you *should* change someday when it becomes convenient for you.

Making these decisions can be easy or difficult, depending on one major factor: *leverage*.

Leverage is your ability to associate enough satisfaction with the change that you have no choice but to make the change a *must* in your life (e.g., “I *must* exercise” is appreciably different than “I *should* exercise”). The more leverage you have, the easier the decision is to make and follow through with—because the satisfaction you'll experience on the other side of the change is so high that you *must* make the change a reality.

Whenever a change doesn't last, it's always because the person doesn't see enough long-term benefit from the change (i.e., he or she doesn't associate enough satisfaction with the change *or* he or she associates too much

dissatisfaction with making the change).

But once you can associate an immense amount of satisfaction with the change, it becomes a *must* for you. For example, the satisfaction of living a healthy lifestyle was enough for us to make some dietary and exercise changes in our lives. To get this leverage, we started to associate dissatisfaction with our current states (i.e., the way we looked in the mirror, the way we felt after a big meal, and all the other things that generally made us feel terrible). Then we began to associate immense amounts of satisfaction with the daily changes we had made (e.g., we enjoyed experiencing food as nourishment, rather than entertainment; we enjoyed our daily exercises, finding satisfaction in the small changes we were making in our bodies each day).

## **Taking Action**

Once you decide to make a change in your life—once you have enough leverage—it's important to take immediate action towards making the change. This doesn't mean you have to go out and run ten miles to improve your health or quit your job today to pursue your passions. Rather, you should take one small baby step in the right direction. You must build some momentum first. Otherwise, you will experience large amounts of dissatisfaction and your change won't last.

These first few steps are of paramount importance. Once you get enough momentum behind you, the change becomes fun and exciting and you want to continue to improve and grow. Thus, you want to find little ways to make improvements in each area of your life, be it exercising daily, strengthening your relationships via one meaningful conversation per day, spending one hour on whatever you're most passionate about, etc. These small changes add up quickly, and they compound on top of each other. And, pretty soon, you'll glance in the rearview mirror and be stunned by how much progress you've made.

That's what happened to us. Over the course of two years, everything changed. We left our big corporate jobs, changed our diets, started exercising regularly, got healthy, strengthened our core relationships, made great new relationships, started pursuing our passions, and contributed to more people than we ever had before. We didn't know that making this many changes was possible in such a short period of time, but when we look back at it, we're thankful we decided to take gradual daily actions that changed everything for us in just a couple of years.

## **Raise Your Standards**

What seemed impossible yesterday, will often seem easy tomorrow. So if you want to continue to grow, you must continue to raise your standards. Otherwise, you'll plateau. Or worse, if you ever lower your standards, you'll begin to atrophy.

While you're taking your daily incremental actions, it's important to raise the bar just a little each day, especially when it's uncomfortable. Getting outside your comfort zone is an important part of growth. You needn't raise the bar too high, but just high enough to make your change a little challenging and a little more difficult each day. Over time, your gradually raised standards will add up to changes larger than you could have imagined.

For the two of us, the most glaring example of raising our standards was with respect to our health. Once we made the decision to change our diet and exercise, and we started taking daily actions to improve both of these areas, we would also raise the bar just a little each day, especially with exercise. There was a point when neither of us exercised at all. In Joshua's case he couldn't do a single push-up or a single pull-up. At the beginning, he learned some techniques that allowed him to do modified versions of both exercises until one day he was able to do one of each. One push-up turned into two, which turned into 10, which eventually turned into over 100 in a row. The same was true for other exercises as well. If he would have attempted to do 100 when he started, he would have failed. That failure would have presented with it a considerable amount of dissatisfaction, discouraging him from continuing his growth. He likely would have given up. Instead he gradually raised the bar each day, building more and more on the days prior.

## **Consistent Actions**

While you continue to raise your standards, it's important to focus on consistent action. Said another way, it's easier to raise the bar a little each day than raise it seven times as much each week or 30 times as much each month.

For example, it's important to strengthen your relationships each day. You will get a lot more benefit from being nice to your lover today *and* tomorrow than you will from yelling at them today and buying them flowers tomorrow.

The same holds true for all areas of your life. The key to real growth is consistency. Consistent gradual action taken every day is the way we changed our lives. It feels like a slow climb at first, but once you build enough momentum you won't want to stop growing. It's the growth that makes you feel alive.

# CHAPTER 6: CONTRIBUTION

## **The Importance of Contribution**

Contributing to other people in meaningful ways is the most important of the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. Don't believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, getting into the best shape of your life, finding your soulmate, establishing the most meaningful relationships possible, paying off all your debt, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), finding the thing that makes you the most passionate, discovering your mission in life, and finding new ways to grow every day.

Now what? Bask in your wealth, fortune, and fame at the top of your mound of money, swimming through your cash and coins like Scrooge McDuck? Not hardly.

## **Growth Leads to Contribution**

As you grow, an something amazing tends to happen: you have more of yourself to give. It's an incredible cycle: the more you grow, the more you can help others grow; and the more you help others grow, the more you grow in return.

## **Beyond Yourself**

Growth feels great, but contribution can feel even better. That's because you'll often do more for the people you love than you will do for yourself. The reason you're willing to do more for the people you love is that humans have an intrinsic need to contribute beyond themselves. It's one of the most basic instincts that humans possess.

## **Ways to Contribute**

A nice thing about contributing to other people is that there are countless ways to do so. And there isn't a right or wrong way to contribute. All contribution is positive contribution. Thus, it is important to learn how to *best* contribute to the people around you.

Later in this chapter, we'll discuss how the two of us contribute charitably to

local organizations as well as through the free content on our website, but it's important to note that donating your time to these types of activities is not the only way to contribute to other people. Instead, you can find tiny ways to contribute to people in many of your current activities.

In our past corporate lives, we both led large groups of people for a major corporation. In doing so, we both discovered that the most rewarding part of our workday always revolved around these times of coaching and mentoring. In other words, we felt the most fulfilled whenever we were adding value to other people's lives. Thus, whether you're donating your time to a charity or you're finding new ways to contribute to the *primary* relationships in your life, you are doing one thing: adding value.

## **Adding Value**

*How does this task add value?* This is a question we used to ask ourselves every day in our corporate jobs. More than anything else, this one question helped us succeed. We also asked our employees the same question: *How did you add value today?* And now we still ask this question of ourselves each day.

At its core, this question allows you to identify how you're contributing. If you don't have a good answer, then another question is appropriate: *How could I add value to this situation?* or *How could I better add value?* By asking these questions you begin to understand how to use your limited time to better contribute to the people around you.

For example, have you ever witnessed an inspiring short speech or monologue that made you want to take immediate action? Similarly, have you gone through a semester-long college or high school class that added the same amount of value to your life? If you're like most people, the answer is yes to both of these questions. But if you had the opportunity to add immense value to someone's life in one hour, doesn't that make more sense than stretching it out over weeks or months? Of course it does.

While this might seem like a drastic example, the point is to make the most of your interactions. If you're constantly asking yourself *How am I adding value?* you'll start getting some great answers. When you think in terms of adding value, you'll start to notice that everything you do starts adding value in various ways. That's because over time you'll begin to weed out anything that doesn't add value to your own life or to other people's lives.

## **How We Contribute**

We've found plenty of ways to contribute to people in our local community (in Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio), as well as to people in 151 countries all over the world (via our website).

For example, locally, we've donated our time to Habitat for Humanity, local soup kitchens, and various other charitable organizations. We've helped paint schools, raise money, clean up the streets, paint fire hydrants and parks, and helped the community in various other ways.

Furthermore, we've been fortunate enough to attract over 100,000 monthly readers from 151 countries to our website, where our desire is to help people live more meaningful lives with less stuff.

Thus, there are at least two ways you can contribute to others:

1. **Local Organizations:** You can contribute to local organizations who come together to contribute to the local community (e.g., the aforementioned Habitat for Humanity, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, various other non-profit organizations, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and the like). For a list of great places to start, visit [volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org) or check out the classifieds in your local free community paper.
2. **Start Your Own Thing:** Many people discover so much satisfaction from contributing to others that it becomes important to them to create their own means by which to contribute. For us, this meant starting a website where we documented our journey and helped other people by sharing advice based on our experiences. For other people this could mean any number of things: from starting a community garden to providing work training to inner-city children. Typically, if you're going to start your own thing, you get there by contributing to local organizations first, determining how you can best add value in the process.

We tend to subscribe to a combination of the two, because they fulfill us in different ways. Donating our time to local non-profit organizations allows us to connect with people face to face, as well as connect with the community as a whole. Our website, on the other hand, allows us to contribute intellectually to a



much larger group of people in ways that would not be possible without the Internet.

Wherever you start, you'll likely need to start somewhere that's a little out of your comfort zone if you're not used to contributing in these ways. That's completely understandable. You'll want to check out different organizations, different locations with different people, until you find what's right for you. It also helps to have some variety in the ways in which you help so that your contribution efforts continue to feel fresh and exciting.

## **Big or Small Equals Satisfaction**

The good news about contribution is that no matter how you contribute, you get to feel an immense satisfaction from your contributions—a satisfaction like no other. We started contributing on a small scale, well before we had our website, by seeking out local charity events in which we could participate. We would tag along with whatever group was donating their time and we'd help however we could. After our first couple of events we discovered something unexpected: we felt really, really good about our contribution; contributing beyond ourselves gave us a deep sense of satisfaction we didn't experience from other aspects of our lives.

## **Writing Checks Is Not the Answer**

We've heard some people say things like *I don't have the time to donate my time to charity; I'll just write a check instead*. While donating money to charitable organizations is great (and we certainly encourage you to do so if you can afford it), the satisfaction you get from such donations pales in comparison to actual engaged contribution. The face-to-face interactions, the physical exertion, and the mental activity of being completely immersed in contribution is far more rewarding than writing a check.

## **Two Types of Positive Experiences**

There are two types of positive experiences in life:

1. **Positive experiences you enjoy.** For some people this category includes activities like exercising by playing a sport, teaching a child how to ride a bike, snowboarding, going to a friend's house to watch a

football game, and the like. These are often the best and most effortless experiences in your life. They are easy to do because they are exciting, rewarding, and fulfilling. Unfortunately, these types of experiences are rare compared to the second type of positive experiences.

2. **Positive experiences you dislike.** For some people this category includes most of the activities that are good for them, activities like eating vegetables, exercising daily, sitting down and doing the hard work, conversing with loved ones each night, growing by taking on new challenges.

## Why People Don't Contribute

The reason people don't contribute as much as they should (or as much as they want) is because they often identify contributive experiences as *positive experiences they dislike*. And of course, humans have a natural tendency to avoid doing what they dislike. This must change if you are truly committed to experiencing lasting satisfaction and fulfillment.

## The Key to Living Meaningfully

The second type of positive experiences—the positive experiences you dislike—are the key to living a meaningful life. That is, finding ways to transform the *positive experiences you dislike* into *positive experiences you enjoy* is the ticket to changing your life long-term. This one strategy is the ticket to long-term happiness, fulfillment, and a life with meaning.

This strategy doesn't only enable you to change your relationship to contribution; it can be effective in every area of your life. We've waited until now to share this key strategy in order to discuss ways it might be applied to all five dimensions.

- **Health example:** It's not easy to exercise each morning before preparing for an arduous workday. It's easier to get an extra 30 minutes of sleep. But you know without a doubt which experience is better for you. That morning exercise will start your day the right way, give you great momentum and energy for the day ahead, and will

certainly serve you more good than half-an-hour of sleep.

- **Relationship example:** It's not easy to come home after a long day of work and engage in an hour of meaningful conversation with the people you love; it's far easier to get lost in the television's hypnotic luminescence. But, again, that evening conversation with your partner or close friends will strengthen your relationships and add far more value to your own life (not to mention their life) in ways that TV never could.
- **Passion example:** It's not easy to stay at home at night, obsessively working on your passion, when all your friends and co-workers (i.e., your *secondary* and *periphery* relationships) are grabbing drinks at the local bar; it's easier to go out and have a few beers, eat a few nachos, and have ephemeral exchanges with these people.
- **Growth example:** It's not easy to embrace new experiences like finding new ways to exercise or starting a new business or meeting new people; it's easier to keep doing what you're doing, it's easier to stay in your comfort zone, it's easier to not attempt new things because they might fail.
- **Contribution example:** Similarly, with respect to contribution, it's not easy to get up on a Saturday morning and go work at a community event, it's easier to do a few chores around the house or turn on this season's sporting event or sit on the couch and do nothing at all.

The point is that there will always be something there to tempt you from doing the things that make your life more meaningful. The good news is that you can avoid those tempting activities by transforming the *positive experiences you dislike* into *positive experiences you enjoy*. In this way, all the positive experiences that relate to your life are made enjoyable. We have found ways to take the experiences that used to seem tedious and dull to us, and make them fun and exciting.

## **The Fun & Excitement of Contribution**

No matter what activities the two of us do, we go out of our way to make sure we have fun with them. Whether engaging in activities related to our health, our relationships, our passions, our personal growth, or the ways in which we

contribute to others, we go out of our way to make things playful, silly, fun, and exciting.

Contributing is a serious thing, but we don't take it too seriously. Rather, we're playful, we have fun with what we do, we enjoy the process of contributing. We do this by asking ourselves one question: *How could I make this experience fun and exciting?* This sounds like an elementary question, but it is the foundation of turning the positive experiences we dislike into positive experiences we enjoy.

Praxis: Think of a way you could contribute beyond yourself (preferably in a way you've never contributed before). If you're at a loss, use the website we gave you earlier in this chapter: [volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org). Once you have your means of contribution, ask yourself *How could I make this experience fun and exciting?* Write down all the answers you come up with.

For example, a few weeks before writing this, the two of us worked with Habitat for Humanity on a rainy Saturday afternoon. We were outside in the rain for four hours, donating our time to help build a home for a family on the east side of Dayton. We were outside, putting siding on the house as the cold rain started coming down harder, soaking our clothes and our typically chipper demeanors. Suffice it to say, it wasn't pleasant. At least, not at first. One of us looked at the other and said "How could we make this fun?" Although it was a basic question, the answer wasn't that easy—it's not easy to make cold rain and construction work fun and exciting. So we started brainstorming as we continued hanging the siding:

- What if we got the kids from inside the home and asked them to help us?
- What if we raced to see who could put up the most siding the quickest?
- What if we sang aloud like a couple of idiots while we hung the siding?
- What if we did terrible impressions of actors like Robert DeNiro and Christopher Walken hanging the siding?
- What if we did jumping jacks in the rain every five minutes to take a break from the construction work?
- What if we went inside until the rain let up, made hot chocolate for everyone, and told stories to the family who is building the home? Then we could get them to help us finish the siding when the rain

stopped.

- What if, what if, what if?

Within a few minutes we had over a dozen answers. Most of which were quite silly. But we picked a few and gave them a shot, increasing the level of fun and excitement for an otherwise mundane task. We joked, we laughed, and we had a good time. We turned a dull activity into something we enjoyed, into a great day of contribution, into something we won't forget for a long time.

## **Giving Is Living**

Unless you contribute beyond yourself, your life will feel perpetually self-serving. It's okay to operate in your own self-interest, but doing so exclusively creates an empty existence. A life without contribution is a life without meaning.

The truth is that giving is living. We only feel truly alive when we are growing as individuals and contributing beyond ourselves. That's what a real life is all about. That's what it means to live a meaningful life—a life filled with great health, great relationships, and ultimate passion.

## CHAPTER 7: CONFLUENCE

### **The Most Important Dimension?**

Throughout the five previous chapters, we explored the five dimensions of living a meaningful life. You probably noticed that we started each chapter by presenting you with reasons why that particular dimension was the most important of the five. Truth be told, all five areas are tremendously important. But which area is the most important?

This is a question we have asked ourselves plenty of times, and we tend to reach a different conclusion each time we ask this question. The honest answer is probably that all five areas are equally important. The more precise answer is that the importance of each dimension changes over time for each of us. Thus, we all experience stages—be it brief or lengthy, a day or a month—in which the importance of a particular dimension takes priority over another.

### **A Person's Top Two Dimensions**

We've noticed that over time there are often two dimensions that rise to the top of a person's priority list. In other words, of the five dimensions, an individual tends to make two of them a priority over a long enough timeline. That is to say that even though every person will shift all five dimensions—invariably making any of the five areas a top priority at any particular time—he or she will have two areas that rise to the top considerably more often than the other three. Again, this can vary drastically depending on the individual and his or her personal values and beliefs.

### **Joshua's Top Two Dimensions**

For Joshua, the two areas of his life that tend to receive the most focus are *health* and *passion*. He fulfills his passion by writing every morning as soon as he gets out of bed, and he focuses on his health daily by eating healthy foods and exercising. These things come almost naturally for him, but they didn't always. Once he developed habits he enjoyed though, focusing on these two areas of his life became the easiest.

That isn't to say that the other three areas—*relationships, growth, contribution*—are ignored. They're not. But it's important to know which two areas are your current default dimensions, because then you can focus on the other three that come less naturally. Joshua knows he must make a concerted effort to focus on his relationships, his personal growth, and contributing to others each day. By focusing on the dimensions that come less naturally, Joshua is able to better balance his life.

## **Ryan's Top Two Dimensions**

For Ryan, *relationships* and *growth* reign supreme. As an extreme extrovert, Ryan loves being around people all the time. Fostering relationships comes naturally to Ryan. Similarly, Ryan's competitive nature forces him to compete with himself, promoting rapid personal growth.

This means Ryan must make a daily effort to focus on his bottom three dimensions: *health, passion, and contribution*.

## **Bottom Three Dimensions**

It's important to note that just because a person has two areas on which he or she focuses more than the other three areas, that doesn't make the bottom three areas less important. In fact, the opposite can be true. If an individual focuses too much on one or two particular areas of his or her life, then the other three areas can lack the attention they need, resulting in an unbalanced and unfulfilled life.

For example, if a man focuses all his energy on his health and pursuing his passions, and places too little emphasis on his relationships, then there's a good chance he will feel lonely and depressed. If he avoids growing as an individual, then he will feel stuck and complacent—a spinning wheel. If he sidesteps contributing to others, then he will always feel a certain amount of discontent, for we only feel real happiness when we contribute beyond ourselves.

## **Balancing All Five Dimensions**

Understanding your top two dimensions is important, but balance among all five is paramount. The only way to experience the long-term happiness and contentment is to focus on all five areas.

To do so, we recommend incorporating all five areas into your life each day. Making these five areas the core of your daily life is the best way to ensure you are living a meaningful life.

The best way to do this is to simply ask yourself a question: *How did I*

*incorporate all five dimensions into my life today?*

Once we are aware of how we incorporate these five areas into our daily lives, we become acutely aware of how we are spending our time.

With every action we take, the two of us tend to ask ourselves the following question: *Which area of my life does this action improve?* If it doesn't improve any of the five areas, then we need to ask another question: *How could this task improve one of the five important areas of my life?* If whatever you're doing doesn't improve at least one of the five areas of your life—directly or indirectly—then it's important to find a way to drastically reduce or eliminate that action from your daily life.

Most people's days are filled with tedious, banal tasks that take up much of their time. Thus, we could provide a million examples of daily tasks that do not lend themselves to intentional living. Here are a few obvious examples:

- **Smoking.** Obviously, smoking is bad for your health (so not only does it not improve that area of your life, it actually has a negative effect). Furthermore, smoking doesn't add value to your personal relationships; it doesn't help you pursue your passions; it certainly doesn't help you grow as an individual; nor does it help you contribute to other people.
- **Overeating.** Similar to smoking, eating too much is harmful to your health, and it doesn't contribute to any of the other areas of your life.
- **Gossip.** Talking negatively about others can damage your relationships. Plus, it obviously doesn't fuel any of the other four dimensions.

Like we said, there are myriad examples of everyday things people do that do not positively contribute to their lives.

Take ten minutes and write down all the things you've done in the last week that do not contribute to the five important areas of your life. Now write down why they don't contribute to any of those five areas. How can you eliminate these things from your life?



## The Role of Minimalism

So we finally get back to minimalism. We knew it had to be somewhere in this book other than in the opening chapters, right? So, you might be thinking, how does minimalism come to play in all this?

We'd like to posit to you that minimalism plays a substantial role in living a meaningful life. Recall our definition from the first chapter: *Minimalism is a tool to eliminate life's excess and focus on the essentials*. Therefore, this entire book is about minimalism, because this entire book is about focusing on the five essential areas of life. By embracing minimalism in other aspects of life (your possessions, your work, etc.) you can focus on the most important aspects of your life (viz. the five dimensions mentioned herein).

Thus, living a meaningful life and minimalism go hand in hand. Minimalism acts as a tool, allowing you to focus on what's important much more easily; it clears away the clutter so you can focus on living more deliberately.

What excess items, tasks, and relationships can you remove from your life so you can focus more of your time and energy on all five dimensions?

## A More Meaningful Life

It's also important to ask another question about your daily tasks: *how could this task positively impact one or more of the areas of my life?* By asking better questions like this question, we get better answers.

Not everything you do is as black and white as *smoking* or *gossip*; some daily tasks can be questionable. For example, watching television. There is nothing wrong with watching TV, per se, but if it consumes a large amount of your time, then it can be detrimental to living a meaningful life. So, instead, ask yourself *How could watching television better impact one or more areas of my life?* Perhaps you could schedule your viewing time with a friend, watching your favorite show together, and then afterward the two of you could discuss what happened. The two of us do this with our favorite TV shows. This way we're not stuck in the state of perpetual channel surfing that can consume large amounts of time without adding any value to your life. Or perhaps you can watch TV while you spend an hour on a treadmill or elliptical machine, improving your physical health.

With many questionable items, there is often more than one way to make it positively impact at least one of the five dimensions. If you can't think of a way to turn one of your questionable items into something that impacts one of the five dimensions, then you should most probably remove (or drastically reduce)

that item from your life. It's important to be honest with yourself when considering what things to remove from your life; doing so will provide you with the best possible outcome. Removing some things from your life can be incredibly difficult at first, but the rewards you enjoy are worth the sacrifice.

Other examples of questionable items include things like spending time on the Internet, social media, shopping, daily drive time to and from work, sleeping in too late in the morning, and staying awake too late at night.

What other questionable items take away your time? Make a list. How can you make these tasks positively impact one or more areas of your life?

## **Maximizing Results**

Some of the things we do positively impact *more than one* of the five areas. Often, these are some of the best things you can do to live more meaningfully.

For example, we often enjoy exercising together, which positively impacts our health and our relationship. We enjoy working on our website together, which positively impacts our relationship, helps us grow as individuals, allows us to contribute to other people in meaningful ways, and permits us to actively engage in our passions. In these two examples alone, we cover all five dimensions of living a meaningful life. That's because some activities allow us to maximize our results.

What activities do you do that impact more than one of the five dimensions? What can you do to make some of your current activities impact more of the five dimensions at once?

## **How Do You Know?**

How do you know if you're living a meaningful life?

This is an important question. Unfortunately, there is no black and white answer. There is no checklist or set of absolute maxims by which you must gauge your life to answer this question—just like there is no way to definitively answer many questions in life. *Am I healthy? Am I happy? Am I content? Am I successful? Am I smart? Am I passionate? Am I growing as an individual? Am I contributing beyond myself? Am I a good person?*

You might be thinking, *Great, so I'm almost at the end of the book, and you're not going to tell me if I'm living a meaningful life?*

No, we're not going to tell you. Actually, we *can't* tell you. Only you know for sure. Just as with the aforementioned questions, there are different sets of criteria and internal rules each of us place on these questions. We might think

you're smart or good or happy, but what we think doesn't matter. Only you know for sure.

The way we measure our success in each of the five dimensions is through a simple equation, an equation we call the simple success formula:

$$\textit{Success} = \textit{Happiness} + \textit{Constant Improvement}$$

This equation applies to any of the five dimensions. Ultimately, you are successful in any of these five areas of life if you are happy with where you currently are and if you are constantly improving that area of your life.

For example, you may not be in the best shape in the world, but if you are happy with the progress you've made, and you're happy with your daily improvements, then you are successful in that area of your life. Conversely, if you are in great shape, but you are not improving your health in tiny ways each day, then you won't feel successful in that area in the long run. Or, if you're not happy with your physical shape, but you are constantly improving, then you aren't yet successful in that area of your life, but you are most likely on the road to success if you are making small daily improvements to your overall health.

Similarly, if you're not happy with your relationships and you are not making any improvements in that area of your life, you are unsuccessful. For the two of us, this was the case for all five dimensions just a few years ago. If you go back and read the first chapter, you'll notice that neither of us were happy with our lives, neither of us were happy with our health or our relationships or our passions or our personal growth or how we contributed beyond ourselves. What's worse, is that we also weren't improving these areas of our lives. In fact, if anything, these areas were further deteriorating as we journeyed down the paths we were traveling.

This is when we decided to take back control of our lives. We used the principles of minimalism to eliminate the excess stuff in our lives so we could focus on the five important aspects of our lives every day. Over the course of two years, everything changed for us. We got rid of the superfluous in favor of the essential, in favor of a more meaningful life.

None of this was easy. It takes daily focus and commitment to constant improvement in all five areas of life. And to continue living a meaningful life, we must continue to commit to constantly improving each area of our lives. We must do so every day. Small daily improvements make all the difference in the world.

What we discovered over the last two years is that we can be happy and content, we can improve our lives every day, and we can live meaningful lives—and so can you.



THE MINIMALISTS, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, write essays about living a meaningful life with less stuff for their online audience of more than 100,000 monthly readers. They have published several bestselling books about simple living and have been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, CBS, NBC, FOX, NPR, CBC, *Zen Habits*, and numerous other outlets. Find more information at [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com).

## **BOOKS BY THE MINIMALISTS**

### **NONFICTION**

*Minimalism: Essential Essays*

*Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life*

### **FICTION by JOSHUA FIELDS MILLBURN**

*Falling While Sitting Down: Stories*

*Days After the Crash: A Novella*

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